ARCHIE LOVELL.

ARCHIE LOVELL.

A Novel.

BY

MRS EDWARDS,

AUTHOR OF

"MISS FORRESTER," "MORALS OF MAYFAIR," ETC., ETC.

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CONTENTS.

CHAP.		PAGE
I.	A VAMPIRE BROOD	1
II.	THE HONOURABLE FREDERICK LOVELL ...	13
III.	BRUNE AUX YEUX BLEUS	23
IV.	ARCHIE	32
V.	A CIGAR BY MOONLIGHT	43
VI.	ROBERT DENNISON'S SECRET	51
VII.	THE LODGING IN CECIL STREET	65
VIII.	"NOBLESSE OBLIGE"	74
IX.	LUCIA	80
X.	"MY LIFE IS WEARY"	96
XI.	ADRIFT IN LONDON	107
XII.	"YOU HAVE REJECTED ME"	117
XIII.	ON THE PIER	137
XIV.	AT SEA	144
XV.	MR DURANT'S GENEROSITY	154
XVI.	THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS	164
XVII.	"PLAY, OR TAKE MISS?"	176
XVIII.	AMONG THE PHILISTINES	190
XIX.	OLD LOVE AND NEW!	201
XX.	CAPTAIN WATERS' SENSE OF DUTY	218
XXI.	ARCHIE'S CONFESSION	230

802

CONTENTS.

CHAP.		PAGE
XXII.	A VAMPIRE "AT HOME"	245
XXIII.	LE RENARD PRÊCHE AUX POULES	254
XXIV.	FOUND DROWNED	260
XXV.	DEAD ROSE-LEAVES!	267
XXVI.	BY THE RIVER-SIDE	273
XXVII.	"G. S. D."	282
XXVIII.	WORKING UP A CASE	289
XXIX.	DURANT'S COURT	302
XXX.	ARCHIE PAYS HER DEBT	316
XXXI.	IN THE SECOND COLUMN OF "THE TIMES" ...	333
XXXII.	THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM	344
XXXIII.	FAREWELLS TO LUCIA	352
XXXIV.	"FAIS CE QUE DOIS!"	368
XXXV.	AWAKENING CONSCIENCE	376
XXXVI.	"WHERE IS SHE?"	386
XXXVII.	"HERE!"	409
XXXVIII.	ARCHIE'S OVATION	414
XXXIX.	IN THE DARK HOUR	422
XL.	"ADVIENNE QUE POURRA!"	430
XLI.	A GLIMPSE OF THE BLUE	438

ARCHIE LOVELL.

CHAPTER I.

A VAMPIRE BROOD.

It was a bright moonlight night, in the last week of July, 186—, and half the population of Morteville-sur-Mer had turned out, as the fashion of Morteville-sur-Mer is, to walk upon the pier.

Among the crowds of men and women thus occupied, and even at a time of year when Morteville is most thronged with sea-bathers from all parts of France, the preponderance of English people was unmistakable. Can you mistake for a moment the dress, the walk, the laugh, the voice of our compatriots?—especially of that class of our compatriots who find it convenient to reside out of England and in such places as Morteville-sur-Mer? A few Britons of a different type there may have been there,—quiet, plainly-dressed people,—passing through Morteville on their way to Paris, and walking on the pier after dinner simply because better air was to be got there than in the stifling over-crowded hotels within the town. But these you would have passed without notice in the crowd. The mass of Britons, the mass who arrested your eye and your ear as they passed, were the English residents in the place—the actual Anglo population of Morteville-sur-Mer: some of them flashy and over-dressed; others poor-looking, subdued, out-at-elbows; but none wholly devoid of interest to the careful observer of his kind. For every one who lives in Morteville has a reason for doing so. And in the history of every one who has a

reason for living out of his country, there must, I think, be something—some misfortune, some debt, some imbecility, oftentimes some crime—that may well make us, who sit by our own firesides still, pause and meditate.

"I don't believe their name is Wilson, at all," remarked Mrs Dionysius O'Rourke; "and if you recollect right, my dear Mrs Maloney, I said so to you from the first. I believe he's a Trant—one of Lord Mortemaine's sons—away in hiding from his creditors; indeed O'Rourke says he can swear to having seen the man's face in Homburg three years ago, and then his name was Smithett. He, he, he!" and Mrs O'Rourke, being the possessor of six hundred a-year, and so a magnate in Morteville, her laugh was instantly echoed among the little knot of familiar and congenial spirits by whom she was at this moment surrounded.

"I've nothing to say against the poor unfortunate man himself," chimed in the shrill voice of old Mrs Maloney, the Mrs Candour of the community. "Indeed, I think every one must pity him, poor creature, with the life he leads at home between those dreadful women. But as to his daughter!—as to Miss Archie Wilson!"

And Candour threw up her eyes, and clasped her aged hands, as one might do who possessed all the details—but would not—no, no, no! for worlds would not reveal them—of an erring fellow-creature's sins.

"Miss Wilson is really growing very pretty," said another voice; a man's this time. "Who would have thought a year ago she would turn out such a fine-looking girl?"

"Oh, I think her lovely, lovely!" exclaimed an enthusiastic impulsive young being of about four-and-thirty. "Such beautiful eyes, and such a sweet mouth and teeth, Captain Waters! Poor, *poor* little Archie!"

"The speaker was Miss Augusta Marks,—Gussy Marks, as she was commonly called among her friends; at once the professional toad-eater general, and the literary or intellectual element of Morteville. On what ground this young creature founded her relationship with the literature of her country was never clearly made out. She referred vaguely herself, it was understood, to the *Saturday Review;* but her more intimate friends professed themselves to be in possession of data regarding a romance once contri-

buted by her to the *Brompton Herald, or Penny Household Guide*, under the title of "Lucile, or the Duke's Victim: a Revelation from Life." Whether this was true or false; whether the revelation was printed or allowed to remain in manuscript, Gussy Marks announced herself, and all Morteville spoke of her, as a literary character. If she had written *Vanity Fair*, could she have done more? If you can attain a reputation without work, who is the gainer? Only in one respect the somewhat impalpable nature of her profession made itself disagreeably felt. Gussy remained poor; and had to work hard for her daily dinner by fetching and carrying news about from house to house, and generally flattering all such persons—there were not very many in Morteville—as would not only receive poor Gussy's attentions, but let her take their value out afterwards in solid eating and drinking.

Amusing Miss Gussy Marks undoubtedly was. She was bitterly spiteful; and to strangers, when they first settle in a dull place like Morteville, bitter inveterate spite, even when it is unseasoned by a grain of wit, is better than no entertainment at all. But she was not capable, as in their different fashions were Mesdames O'Rourke and Maloney, of boldly killing any man's reputation outright. Some of Mrs O'Rourke's falsehoods were sudden, almost justifiable homicides. Gussy's carefully-worded equivocations were deliberate, cold-blooded murders; murders with malice aforethought. She belonged to the class who whisper about versions, more or less blackened, of other people's vilifications; who supply all missing links in other people's evidence; who are "sure they heard so somewhere—not from you, dearest Mrs Blank? Then from some one else, for I know *I* never thought so." The vilest, the most cowardly class of all, in short. The assassin runs some risk; the wretch who hovers round till the deed is done, and then warily begins to mangle the helpless corpse of the slain, none.

"Such an agreeable companion! such unfailing spirits!" all new-comers to Morteville pronounced as Miss Marks prostrated herself in turn at their feet. Then, as the months passed, the newcomer's door would gradually open less freely to Gussy; and the women of the family would speak of her as "a very amusing person for a time; but—;" and the men make short cuts down the nearest street whenever they met her; and poor Gussy have to

fall back for intimacy on her old patronesses—the O'Rourke-and-Maloney coalition—and any such stray birds as she might chance occasionally to pick up at their houses.

On this especial evening, and at this moment, when Archie Wilson's ill-doings are being brought forward for the purpose of moral animadversion, a whole group of the notabilities or typical people of Morteville are assembled beneath the lighthouse at the extreme end of the pier: *inter alia*, Mrs Dionysius O'Rourke, Mr Montacute and his daughters, the literary element, Captain Waters, and old Mrs Maloney—a majority of ladies, as is generally the case, the Englishmen in Morteville not affecting much appearance in public. They play cards of a morning, play them of an afternoon, play them of an evening (very well they play too: don't sit down here at loo or écarté unless you are tolerably sure of your game); and the two or three men, who happen at the present moment to be absent from the club, puff away helplessly at their cigars, and listen, without offering any observations of their own, while the women talk.

Let me take a rapid sketch of one or two of these people before Miss Archie Wilson's character is submitted to the scalpel. *A Dieu ne plaise* that they should hold any place save in this first or introductory scene of my story! *à Dieu ne plaise* that I should essay to paint a finished picture of one of them! But a few brief outlines my pen must with repugnance trace: first, to make you understand what manner of people these are who speak; secondly, to show you in what kind of social atmosphere Archie Wilson herself—the unconscious subject of their moral vivisection—had spent the last two years of her child's life.

Mrs Dionysius O'Rourke—on account of her great size as well as her high position in society, I feel that I must give her precedence over her friends—was a lady of about, say, fifty-five, and of considerable social experience; had been thrice married—("Let us say married! Ah, yes—married!" Mrs Maloney would remark with bitter irony during the half-yearly period when these two potentates invariably passed each other without bowing in the street)—and had resided in every place of easy resort on the Continent. In all that Mrs O'Rourke ever told respecting the past, the first husband was dropped altogether; the second, Colonel

Morier, or as she, in her vain attempts to lisp down the native Tipperary, called it, "Mawyer," brought into extraordinary preëminence, save on one occasion, well remembered by the Maloney, when a family called Morier really came to Morteville, and when Mrs O'Rourke never mentioned their name nor came outside her door during the six weeks of their stay. The third and present one, Mr Dionysius O'Rourke, seemed to be viewed both by his wife and by her friends in the light of a butler—an hypothesis that O'Rourke himself supported by the assumption of all those broad and generous views in regard to the consumption of liquor which butlers generally hold.

To judge by the number of dukes and duchesses she talked of, Mrs O'Rourke had mixed in excellent society all her life; and barring the adventitious circumstances of seventeen stone of solid flesh, the ineradicable Tipperary, and an undue tendency to gorgeous yellow satin and birds of strange plumage in the matter of dress, she was really an entertaining, and, on the theory of Joe Gargery, a fine figure of a woman. She took away everybody's character, certainly; but who should know better than Mrs O'Rourke how easy it is for people to live and be happy without *that?* And she gave and enjoyed good dinners, and not worse wine than was commonly current in Morteville. How could any one say that Mrs Maloney's infamous stories of bygone days were correct? Would not an open house, a real butler (as well as O'Rourke), and six-hundred a-year, insure popularity in other places as well as Morteville-sur-Mer?

Mrs Maloney, Mrs O'Rourke's closest ally and most implacable enemy, was of a totally different build; for whereas Mrs O'Rourke had been wicked and prosperous, and gone into a comfortable mass of human flesh and blood, Mrs Maloney had been wicked and grown lean upon it; and in that one fact of being in a Banting or anti-Banting state lies much philosophy. Indeed it is not certain that, for moral classification, the whole of humanity might not broadly be divided into these two sections,—the fat, the lean; the jovial, the ascetic. There were softening moments, weaknesses of the flesh, in Mrs O'Rourke, as in all fat, food-loving creatures. At a certain tempered stage of fulness, one point short of surfeit or inebriety—in the interval, for instance, between dinner and the

last glass of hot brandy-and-water before bed-time—she would as soon have called you a good fellow as a bad one; but no eating or drinking ever mollified Mrs Maloney's flinty soul or softened a line upon her bird-like hatchet-face. She could never overcome her sickening spite against the human race for persisting still in being young and handsome and happy, as she had once been. She detested people for being wicked, because she had no longer the temptation to be wicked herself; she detested them for being good, because she had never known the meaning of good while she lived.

When Mrs Dionysius O'Rourke went to the Morteville balls, all the little Frenchmen would run about her, in sheer amazement at her undraped bulk.

"Hold, Alphonse! hast thou seen the English mamma! But 'tis rather an exhibition for a museum than a ball-room. *Une hippopotame qui se décolléte comme ça!*"

From old Mrs Maloney's corpse-like face and anatomical neck and arms, bared as only utter fleshlessness can ever bare itself, men of all nations turned away with horror. She was not even curious. Occasionally, indeed, she would drag into her meshes some unfledged boy who thought it savoured of manliness to ape precocious cynicism, or some hoary-headed roué who would fain hear the vices imputed to others which he no longer had it in his power to commit. And then was Mrs Maloney in her glory. Then she almost felt that in the possession of a tongue like hers resides compensation for being old and loveless and unbeautiful. Then was youth vilified and age dishonoured; then were beauty and love and faith, and all the fairness and the nobleness of our common humanity, disfigured by the vitriol flung from that black heart, until her listener—however foolish, however world-hardened—would turn away with a shudder from the blasphemies of those lips that had once been fresh and young, and that children's kisses had blest.

Look at the pictured impersonations in which the old painters' fancies used to embody all that men conceive of when they use the word *fiend*—the malignant, the impious, the hopeless—and you will see Maloney; she who thirty years before had been, if fame spoke true, the beauty and the toast of one of the most brilliant, the most genial-hearted cities in the kingdom.

If priest or parson would have let her mount into his pulpit, show her withered face, and vent her impotent rage against the life she had made vile use of, *there* had been a sermon to keep women pure and men honourable. The Spartans turned their drunken slaves to some account. Can we, with all our science, find no use for the scum, the dregs of our society? Is our children's love of honour, of virtue, of truth, of courage—of the crown of all these, charity—to be taught by written books alone?

Seated between these two women—I pass over Mr O'Rourke, a poor little man weighing about as much as any one of his wife's limbs, and at this particular moment, as usual, not by any means more pleasant company for all the brandy he had taken since his dinner—seated between Mesdames O'Rourke and Maloney was Captain Waters, one of the head dandies or clothes-wearing men of Morteville.

Captain Waters was perhaps eight-and-twenty, perhaps eight-and-forty. Certain effete and obliterated human faces seem of texture too putty-like for time's finger to mark them with any lasting indentation. Captain Waters had one of these faces. He had pale hair, pale eyes, pale cheeks, pale girlish hands, a pale coat, a pale hat, and an eye-glass; the last the most distinctive feature about him. Who was Captain Waters? No one knew. What service had he been in? What were his means of living? No one knew. It was faintly believed that he was a married man; one of those stray atoms of matrimony that do float about on the surface of Anglo-Continental life. It was believed also that some one thought they had once seen him in Italy robbing a church with the Garibaldians. It was generally admitted that he played the best game of écarté in Morteville. As far as voice and manner went, Captain Waters was a gentleman; only an occasional restlessness of manner, a proneness to change any conversation as soon as it trenched too nearly on his own personal history, betraying the class of professional adventurers to which he belonged. He said he was related—very possibly it was true—to more than one great English family, and that nothing but a change in the Cabinet was needed for him to obtain one of the foreign diplomatic appointments for which his perfect command of Continental languages fitted him. In the mean time, he was economizing abroad, that is

to say, wearing good clothes, living at one of the best hotels in the place; flirting desperately with young ladies; getting dinners out of old ones; and generally winning the money of any men who were well-born enough to become Captain Waters's companions—he detested vulgar people—and to walk arm-in-arm with him on the Morteville Pier.

Captain Waters was spiteful; as spiteful to the full as Mesdames O'Rourke and Maloney. But while theirs was heartfelt, malignant spite—the work of artists who put their hearts into what they fabricated—Captain Waters's was dilettanteism. Everything, even the trouble of pulling characters to pieces, bored or seemed to bore him. Nothing, including every possible moral depravity or deformity, surprised him. Raising his eye-glass up a quarter of an inch, taking his cigarette languidly in his little blue-veined hand, and smiling barely enough to show his even teeth, he would just throw in a word, a delicate finishing touch, when the other common assassins had done their work. You may imagine what the word would be to appreciative hearers. A plat, dressed by the hand of a *cordon bleu*, crowning some repast of high-seasoned coarser dishes—savoury and tasteful perhaps in their way, but lacking that quintessence of flavour which only education and refinement knows how to prepare for the palate of civilized man.

The last noticeable person in the group was Miss Gussy Marks, a few of whose moral characteristics we have already considered. The *personnel* of this young person, had she flourished thirty years ago, might have justified her claims in the matter of literature; for thirty years ago, women who wrote were, we learn, considered in this country somewhat in the light of monsters—women only in their invincible inferiority of brain; but otherwise unsexed by the mere attempt to raise themselves above their samplers. Miss Marks had a high bare forehead, a flat head, beetling eyebrows, great bird-like eyes and nose, a splendid development of animalism about the lower part of the face, and a moustache! Yes, a moustache! Why should I euphemize? A moustache such as many a fledgling ensign would incur his year's debts in advance to possess.

The last new-comers to Morteville—consequently the last new chance of dinner that Miss Marks was seeking to propitiate—were Mr and the two Miss Montacutes, by whose side she now stood.

Regarding them there is little to say. The Miss Montacutes were pretty girls, who talked a good deal of grand married sisters, and their regret at having to come to such a slow place as Morteville for poor mamma's health. And Mr Montacute was a man who had formerly been rich and now was poor, and who had spent a great deal of his time in Continental jails, and already was meditating as to how much was likely to be garnered out of the Morteville shopkeepers before he should run away. Yet once Mr Montacute had kept open house and given money with a free hand to those who asked for it, and had brought up his lads to call dishonour by its right name. Look at his face now,—the set hard mouth, the eyes that won't meet yours; listen to the bullying tone in which he talks to his wife and daughters, and say if professional insolvency can be pleasant work to a man who was bred a gentleman? Say if he too might not add some comments to that unwritten sermon of which I spoke just now?

"Poor little Archie Wilson!" repeated Miss Marks, with unction; "if some one would only take the child up, something might be made of her yet."

"I should think somebody would be quite sure to take her up," suggested Captain Waters, in the intervals of making a fresh cigarette. "You need not be uneasy on that score, Miss Marks."

"Captain Waters, you are too bad," cried Mrs Maloney, while Mrs O'Rourke chuckled, and the Miss Montacutes remarked demurely how plainly you could see the light-house on the opposite coast. "Of course it's all very amusing for you gentlemen, but for the ladies in the place—and young ladies especially—I say it's most embarrassing. Why, really now, Miss Montacute, you mustn't be shocked, but I do think it right to put you on your guard"—only Mrs Maloney called it 'gu'iard.' "What do you suppose I saw last night from my window?"

No one's imagination was equal to the emergency. Captain Waters looked up at the sky and smiled.

"Well, then, you must know, Mr Montacute, my lodgings is just opposite to the Wilsons', Roo d'Artois—and 'twas a moonlight night, as this may be, and everything as distinct as possible—and about eleven, or half-past, I sat down by my window to think a little"—she sighed piously,—"before retiring to rest, when what

should come out from the Wilsons' parlour-window but a man's figure!"

The whole company repeated, as one man, the word "window!"

"Yes, window!" exulted Mrs Maloney, warming to her work. "If it had been by the door no one would have been more willing than myself to give her the benefit of the doubt, for of course the Dormers live on the first, and the old Countess d'Eu on the second; and it is possible, though extremely unlikely, that this person might have been unconnected with the Wilsons. But no, it was from their window it appeared. They live on the rez-de-chaussé, Mr Montacute. Not that I blame them for that, poor creatures; but with Mrs Wilson wearing a silk-velvet cloak, and Archie, to my own knowledge, seven pairs of boots since Christmas, economy it is not. A man's figure, dressed in a short paletot, a wideawake hat, and smoking a cigar! Now comes the point of the story. That figure was Miss Archie Wilson herself!"

Horror on all sides; even Captain Waters languidly interested.

"And dressed—like a man?" ejaculated Gussy Marks plaintively; dressed *quite* like a man, my dear Mrs Maloney?"

"Well, no," explained Maloney, "the miserable girl wore some kind of dark skirt, which indeed betrayed her to me—that and her hair, which, although it was tucked up, I could see the bright red in the moonlight; but for the rest of her figure dressed as I tell you—a man's paletot, a wideawake hat, and smoking a cigar. She paraded up and down the pavement for some time, her hands in her pockets, her hat stuck on one side, and no more ashamed of herself, my dear, than any of us are now! Indeed, the way she stared up at me was so offensive that I rose at last and shut down my window, and saw no more of the disgusting spectacle. We may form our own conclusions," sniffed Mrs Maloney, virtuously, —"we may form our own conclusions as to what should make a young girl assume such a disguise, and steal away from her father's house at midnight. Whatever Christian charity has bid me do hitherto, I feel my duty to society leaves me only one course now —I shall treat Miss Archie Wilson with the *hotombar* at once; and I think every other well-conducted woman"—Captain Waters's cigarette made him cough—"should do the same."

Though Mrs Maloney had lived much abroad, her mastery of

French idiom was still precarious; hence one of her favourite expressions was that of treating people with the *hotombar*, which fanciful compound she emphasized much as she might have done the word tomahawk, or any other deadly weapon of attack.

"But perhaps it was all done as a joke," hazarded the prettiest Miss Montacute, who was too young and innocent to be shocked. "When Tom's at home, Lizzie and I often dress up in his hat and coat—don't we, Lizzie?"

"Yes, but you don't go out into the streets in male dress, dear Miss Montacute," put in old Gussy Marks persuasively. "Of that I am quite sure. This poor neglected child, Archie, possibly—possibly does these things in ignorance; but still"—Gussy mused or pretended to muse—"it is confirmatory of what I told you I had seen, Mrs O'Rourke, is it not?"

"And what have you seen, Miss Marks?" inquired Captain Waters, when Mrs O'Rourke had croaked forth her little contribution of venom. "Don't let us lose one scrap of evidence against this unhappy and misguided young person."

"My scrap of evidence, then," answered Gussy, growing suddenly tart,—"my scrap of evidence, Captain Waters, is, that Archie goes out on these moonlight expeditions to meet Mr Durant,—nothing more."

"To meet Mr Durant?" repeated Waters, really opening his eyes now, and flinging the end of his cigarette into the sea—"the man who is staying at my hotel?"

There was something to be interested in at last. Not a wretched little girl's reputation, but the possibility of detaining in Morteville a young man so excessively fond of staking high, and so excessively ignorant of all the finer intricacies of écarté, as Mr Durant. They had played together now for five nights; and after deducting the necessary loss incurred by Waters on the first night of the match, Mr Durant was about one hundred and twenty pounds to the bad. What a *deus ex machinâ* it would be if any little flirtation should turn up and make the young man linger about this place! As the vision of Archie's fair girlish face rose before him, Captain Waters felt himself quite soften. Poor pretty little thing! If these old women's stupid scandals were to get about and reach the father's ears, the whole thing might be stopped at once.

"I happen to know that Durant has been quietly at home every midnight since he has been in the place, Miss Marks. I don't know whether Miss Archie Wilson went out to meet him or not."

Now, Gussy Marks hated Captain Waters from her soul: first, because, following a fixed rule he had in regard of ugly (penniless) women, he never looked in her face when he spoke to her; secondly, because his superior powers of pleasing had been the means of ousting her from more than one Morteville house, where before his advent she had been wont to drop in, as of right, at dinner-time.

"You may have any opinions you like, Captain Waters, but you will not prevent me, and others with me, from having ours. If Archie Wilson talks to Mr Durant for an hour together over the back-garden wall of a morning, as I have seen with my own eyes, it is not very scandalous, I think, to assume that she attires herself as Mrs Maloney saw her do, to meet Mr Durant at night."

"Over the back-garden wall? Miss Wilson talks to this Mr What-d'ye-call-him over the back-garden wall? Well, really now we may call it a Providence that the whole thing has come to light; and just before this public ball, where we shall all meet her too! In these foreign places I say one can't be too careful as to the women one associates with." And Mrs Maloney cast up her eyes to heaven, as though rendering a mental thanksgiving for the providential escape she had had in the way of moral contamination. "I don't say that I'd go so far as to cut Mr Wilson, as he calls himself; but as to the girl Archie, I do say that it's a duty we owe to society and to each other to—"

"Good-night, Mrs Maloney," cried a girl's voice close beside her ear. "I hope, now, you're none the worse for sitting up so late last night. It was lovely in the moonlight, wasn't it?"

A child's face,—bright, saucy, unfearing,—looked back at Mrs Maloney for a moment; then the girl broke into a laugh,—a clear merry laugh,—that startled more than one group of foreigners out of their conventional decorum, and Miss Archie Wilson disappeared in the crowd.

For one minute the people who had been talking of her did show sufficient humanity to be guiltily silent. Then, "She has gone down to the sands,—she has gone alone to the sands!" cried

old Gussy Marks, who was the first to rally. "And a gentleman with her,—yes, a gentleman with her!"

All the group of friends turned their heads eagerly in the direction Gussy pointed out, and by the aid of the brilliant moonlight detected a slight childish figure running down one of the flights of steps that connects the Morteville pier with the sands. A minute later, another—and a man's figure was at her side; and all the heads were bent eagerly forward in anticipation of the dreadful and notorious scene they were about to witness. But Morteville to-night was destined to be disappointed of a scandal; and a sort of groan passed through the group of friends as they discovered their mistake. The man proved to be no other than Archie Wilson's father.

"A blind!" cried Mrs Maloney, with the resolute tone of a Christian determined not to be done out of her righteous indignation. "Archie Wilson put on her new hat to walk on the sands with her father! Wait till midnight, and look through my window, if you want to judge of Miss Wilson's innocence! To remind me to my very face of what I'd seen! Dark as it is, she must have seen that I treated her with the *hotombar* that she deserved. Little wretch!"

And then the company breaking up into couples, as they resumed their walk, the characters of each other, as well as of Miss Archie Wilson, began to be demolished.

Let us leave them here, and for ever, to their work!

CHAPTER II.

THE HONOURABLE FREDERICK LOVELL.

Will no one write for us the Lives of Unsuccessful Men? The brothers of the poets, the first cousins of the painters, the godmothers and godfathers of the novelists,—enterprising writers of biography have shown us these and all other relations of great men

from their cradles to their graves. And still the human beings nearer to greatness still,—the men who have not succeeded,—find no historian.

"He started with eighteen-pence in his pocket," we are accustomed to read of the one successful man out of ten thousand. "Eighteen-pence in his pocket, a habit of early rising, strict religious principles, and a taste for arithmetic; and died worth half a million." All right for him,—the one sheep garnered into the great fold of success; but what account have we of the rest of the shadowy host for whose prudence, whose patience, whose religious principles, whose arithmetic even, no market ever came? If there is any law that governs the secret of human success, we have signally failed as yet in discovering its mode of operation. Patience certainly goes a very short way towards attaining it—the great majority of men and women seem to be intensely patient at failure during all their wasted sixty or seventy years of life; and as to great ability, look at some of the best-paid, and yet the shallowest charlatans in the world's history!

Some years ago a Frenchman wrote a book, showing that unsuccessful men of ability are destined by every law, moral and physiological, to become the progenitors of successful ones. Given a father whose life has been spent in a series of intellectual failures, and you will most likely see a son in whom these inchoate tendencies shall assume the shape men worship as success. All the arguments of the book I have forgotten, but I must confess the Frenchman's theory, true or false, struck me at the time as a pleasant one. It assigns to us some use,—to us who have invested our little capital to our best, who have striven as manfully as the most successful among them all, and yet have made no mark upon the age. We represent the sterile year when nature is readjusting her forces, the field which next spring shall be green with corn, the orchard which next autumn shall be bowed down with fruit. More consolatory, at least, to view our failure so,—as the result of physical laws out of our reach at present; more consolatory, I say, to believe there is an average of successful men to each fifty years, and that it is accident whether our fathers' failures are stepping-stones for us, or our own stepping-stones for our sons. Looking over our chest of unpublished MSS., or our gallery of unsold pictures, or our scheme

for national defence (that the government was mad enough to reject), or our electric-telegraph improvement, which broke down only through one error (rectified next week by Smith, who made twenty-five thousand pounds),—shall we not face these our past failures with better temper if we take the Frenchman's view of the subject, than if, as all biographies of successful Britons seem to bid us do, we believe that we have failed because we deserved to fail? We have had our dreams of greatness,—we have thought of inventions that should benefit mankind, have known bitter wintry mornings and sultry noons, have sacrificed and suffered and come to grief. But that we have missed the palm is no absolute reason why the saints who do wear it should deny that our feet once stood, even as theirs did, beside the stake.

The Honourable Frederick Lovell, at present known in Morteville under the name of Wilson, was an instance of thorough painstaking, patient, and absolute failure. In an age when one hundred and nine thousand copies of the second Solomon's poems have been sold, why, I ask myself, did Frederick Lovell's never meet with success? They were commonplace, verbose, affected, strained, moral, and enormously bulky. And still the second Solomon was taken, and poor Frederick Lovell left.

"To be a poet," says Mr Carlyle, "a man must have an insight into the eternal veracities." Frederick Lovell for years had never wearied of repeating this axiom and applying it to himself. Do you understand its meaning, reader? Do I understand it? We think we do, perhaps; and Frederick Lovell thought he did. Who shall say what mysterious flaw in his power of judgment made him to err so egregiously? Where are we to draw the border-line that confined him, as it confines hundreds of painstaking men like him, to such intolerable mediocrity? Until Macaulay told the world that Robert Montgomery's writings bore the same relation to poetry which a Turkish carpet bears to a picture, the world looked upon that arch-impostor as one of the master-spirits of the age. But the wildly-inverted metaphors, the quivering fire-clouds, the racing hurricanes, the galloping white waves, the earth dashing into eternity, of Frederick Lovell scarcely found a critic who would condemn them. And here and there in his writings were thoughts —unstolen ones too—to which all the Montgomerys, all the second

Solomons, could never have given utterance. The man was not a poet; yet on rare occasions you felt that he came painfully, pathetically near to one. Fools and wise men are not two separate nations, with a sea rolling between them, but neighbours each of a common border-land; and in this border-land are many whose nationality it is sometimes hard to decide upon. Frederick Lovell possessed many gifts that certainly put him far away from the category of fools. He was laborious to a degree; he loved his art, or what to him stood for art; he honestly strove to study nature and reproduce her, both with his pen and brush—for the poor fellow painted pictures as bulky as his poems. He was as immeasurably remote from being a fool as he was from being an artist —nay, further, I would fondly like to think. And still, looking at his pictures and reading his verses, the human heart that loved him most—a child's—knew that they were not, and never would be, works of art. All the ingredients were there, like the colours in the Turkey carpet; the glow of genius, that should fuse and mould them into one harmonious whole, was utterly and for ever wanting.

In his social relations Mr Lovell had failed as much as in his artistic ambition. He started in life, as there seemed every probability of his ending it, with an invincible repugnance to accept that belief which most men, wise or fools, have mastered by the age of nine, namely, that two and two make four. Money, or the saving or the utilizing of money, nay, the enjoyment of money, seemed a subject altogether beyond Frederick Lovell's grasp. On his twenty-first birthday he came into twenty thousand pounds; on his twenty-fifth, five thousand out of this sum remained. He had not been very vicious or very extravagant, he thought. He had travelled about, and bought pictures, and enjoyed artistic society, and seen his friends at his table; and it was a very great pity that so little could be done upon a moderate income. What would it be best to do with the five thousand pounds that yet remained? Marry, perhaps.

When any excessively poor man desires to multiply his poverty by two, there is always some excessively poor young woman ready to assist him in working out this little sum of social arithmetic. Just at this juncture Frederick Lovell might, if he had possessed ordi-

nary sense, have settled himself with bread to his mouth for life; his first cousin, the Lady Olivia Carstairs, with fifteen thousand pounds of her own, and only five years older than himself, being willing to become his wife. He told his family he would do everything they all thought right; and promised the following Monday to make Lady Olivia a formal offer of marriage. But on the Sunday that intervened, a girl with long eye-lashes sat two pews before him in church, and Frederick Lovell thought how pleasant it would be to go and live in Rome and study and become an artist in earnest, with such a face as that to haunt his painting-room and inspire his dreams.

He married her; went to Rome and studied; and at the end of a year found himself a widower, in the possession of a little daughter, three thousand pounds capital, and a great many art studies, that no one but himself thought much of, in his painting-room.

The marriage—what there was of it—had turned out more happily than most marriages in which the first foundations are long eye-lashes. Both of them had offended the whole of their relations by marrying each other; and no letters, save Mr Lovell's old bills, had ever followed them from England; and they had had no society; and had spent a great deal more money than they could afford. But they had been happy. Happy for twelve months,—fifty-two weeks,—three-hundred and sixty-five days! Had Frederick Lovell done so very badly with his life, I wonder?

"And I would run away with you, just the same again, Fred," the girl said on her death-bed, with her arms round his neck, and the child, a fortnight old, lying beside her. "Yes, I would, if I knew this was to be the end of it. We should have grown more economical in time, and you would have been a great artist, dear, —I know it. Will you be so without me, I wonder, Fred?"

No; that he never could be. But if he had had in him the materials of a greater man, perhaps he would not have wept for her loss so grievously and so long. Grief, in the true artistic nature, embodies itself, perforce, like every other emotion, in art; and, depend upon it, as soon as Goethe began to seek for consolation in "Egmont," the composition of that marvellous poem worked off some at least of the edge of his passion for Lili. Fred-

erick Lovell had sufficient concentrativeness to suffer more profoundly than common men, but not force of will enough to raise himself, as men following a genuine vocation do, above his misery. He wandered about in Italy with the child, spending his money and doing no work, for a great many months; then came back to England, and thought he might as well read for orders and be a priest.

It was the best resolution he ever made in his life; for there were several nice little livings in the Lovell family, and Lady Olivia, unappropriated still, had an immense love for clergymen and parish domination. As a priest he could have worked what stood to him for poetry into very good sermons, and have painted altar-pieces, and stained glass for windows—the poor fellow was very High Church, and quite earnest and sincere in his religious beliefs—and possibly have succeeded in imposing all his labours as works of high art upon an agricultural population. But when do the round men fall into the round grooves of life? Essayists and reviewers hold livings; and men like Frederick Lovell paint pictures and aspire to understand the Eternal Veracities. On the very eve of respectability, his ordination over, and an encouraging letter from Lady Olivia lying on his table, some wandering artist he had known abroad came to visit Mr Lovell in his London lodgings: and two days later he was a Bohemian on the face of the earth again. His friend had described Dresden and the community of artists there, and the facilities for study and the cheapness of living, in terms too glowing for Frederick Lovell's heart to withstand; and in a fortnight he was installed, with his little daughter, on a third story in the Dresden Market-place, really for once living cheap, and happier than he had yet felt since his wife's death.

He could not write poetry; but I think Mr Lovell's life at this period was almost an unwritten poem. It was an absurdity for the man to devote himself to an ambition he could never attain, to spend his days in making copies which any student of eighteen in the Government schools could have done better, and his nights in writing tomes of verses that no publisher would ever accept. Still over all one intense, unselfish, never-wearying love shone, and made the life noble. No woman ever tended her first-born child more

tenderly than did Mr Lovell his little motherless daughter. She was two years old now,—a sturdy, forward child; already walking and talking in her fashion, and perfectly cognisant that the great awkward male creature she lived with was, at once, her "Josh" and her humble slave. When she hurt herself in any way, she beat him. Mr Lovell was an immense angular man, over six feet high. When he refused her anything, she drooped her head immediately, and pretended to be sick; an appeal that never failed to bring him to abject and instant submission to her wishes. It was Miss Lovell's habit to wake between five and six in the morning; and Mr Lovell, who sat up habitually late at night writing or drawing, was constantly roused from his bed by a pair of tiny, but neither irresolute nor weak, hands at this hour, because "Artie de Mark sehen will," as the child in her broken *patois* worded it. He never rebelled after a certain morning when the child had cried herself white and sick at being refused; and the good German wives, early abroad at their own marketings, would look with wet eyes after the English widower with his black clothes and solemn face, and Archie in his arms, all aflush with delight, and making her slave stop before every fresh basket of fruit that they passed.

One day, when the child was nearly three years old, her hands and face were fever-parched, and for the first time in her life she refused to eat. The solitary German servant of the household threw up her apron over her face, and said the worthy Lord was going to take the child back to Himself. She had seen two children of her sister's in brain-fever, and, at first, they too had flushed faces, and refused food like the Fräulein, and both of them died.

In an agony of mute horror Mr Lovell rushed away to the English physician then living in Dresden, and conveyed to him by looks, rather than words, that his child was dying.

"Hangs her head—won't eat—skin hot?" said the doctor. "Mr Lovell, the child is sickening for the measles. Half the children in Dresden have got measles in its mildest form. Couldn't have it at a better time of the year. No Englishwoman to be with her? Well, let us see now whom you could have,—Miss Curtis? You don't know her?—no matter. Miss Curtis is always ready to nurse anybody. I'll get her to go to you before night."

By night Miss Curtis was at Archie's bedside, where she remained for a fortnight. The child was very ill indeed, and wilful, as all strong impetuous children are, under her sufferings; and when Mr Lovell, helpless in his tortures of fear, watched Miss Curtis bathing his idol's hot eyes, or sponging her hot hands, and soothing her in those thousand ways with which only a woman's hand can soothe a suffering child, he felt that he could have fallen down and kissed the very hem of her dingy old black-silk gown.

As Archie got better, she clung tenaciously to her new friend. Miss Curtis knew lots of things that Archie did not know. Miss Curtis could deftly create a bird, enclosed within bars and sitting on a perch, out of a sheet of paper. Miss Curtis could paint a boy on one side of a card and a gate on the other, and when you twisted the card round by means of a piece of silk, the boy was sitting astride on the gate—whistling, Miss Curtis averred, and Archie believed; could make life-like sweeps out of one of Mr Lovell's old waistcoats, with teeth stitched in white silk, and real brushes, cut off the cat's back, in their hands.

"What shall I ever do without Miss Curtis?" Mr Lovell thought one day, as he watched her sitting beside Archie darning through a great basket of the child's socks—a branch of domestic economy much neglected by the servant-girl—and keeping her amused with stories at the same time. "There's scarlatina, chicken-pox, whooping-cough, and God knows what besides that the baby may have; how am I to bring her through it all alone? Would she ever have struggled through these dreadful measles without Miss Curtis to nurse her?"

Youth, beauty, money would, I verily believe, not have made Frederick Lovell unfaithful to his buried love. He was not unfaithful to her now. For her child's sake he married Miss Curtis. She was a plain little dowdy woman, a good many years older than himself, a lady by birth and education, with eighty pounds a-year to live on; and when Mr Lovell asked her to be his wife, she could really scarcely gasp out "yes," in her bewilderment and gratitude.

"You will find her a treasure—a treasure, my dear sir," remarked her relative the English chaplain, with whom till now she had been living, and who was naturally joyful at transferring her

to other hands. "A good wife cometh of the Lord. Would it be requiring too much that my dear cousin's little money should be strictly settled upon herself?"

It was a long time before Mr Lovell could become accustomed to the special seal of Divine approbation that had been set upon him. He loved beauty in women, and Elizabeth his wife was plain and wizened; he loved silence, and she babbled, chiefly of duchesses, from morning till night; he loved solitude, and he was never alone. Only, as years wore on, and as Archie did take all manner of childish complaints—through all of which her step-mother nursed her faithfully, and as Archie grew to be a great girl, and Mrs Lovell, to the best that was in her, educated her and made her work at her needle and attended her in her walks abroad, and saw to the lengthening of her frocks, and told her what was right and what was wrong for young girls to do, Mr Lovell ceased to ask himself if he had done wrong in marrying again. He could not have brought up the girl without a woman of some kind to help him; and companions or governesses would have required a salary, and very likely have struck for marriage just as Archie was beginning to like them. And besides these considerations—love, and all pertaining to love, wholly and for ever gone—Mr Lovell, in his mania for art, possessed a triple armour against all the small annoyances of life, even a second wife like his wife Elizabeth.

A mania is a pleasure raised within the sacred regions of the ideal, and so put beyond the reach of common loss or disappointment. Powerless to create himself, the faculty of admiration—the faculty, nay, let me say the rare genius of comprehension, the sole gift which can enable an inferior man to stand at the side of great artists—was Mr Lovell's.

As years wore on, and as the fact of his own want of success became just a part of his every-day life, he only grew more and more confirmed in his admiration for the success of others, and gradually, a transition not uncommon in men of this character, into a dealer on a small scale in different works of art.

On leaving Dresden, when Archie was about six or seven years of age, he returned once more to Rome; and here he had his head-quarters until about two years before the present time. He believed

himself all this time to be an unhappy man. He knew that the blue Roman sky shone over the six feet of earth where all the best part of himself lay buried. He knew that the present Mrs Lovell was feebly irritating to him; that he had alienated himself utterly from every tie at home; that the age was passing on, while he neither with pen nor brush had made the faintest indentation upon it; finally, that year by year he seemed to grow more hopelessly foolish in regard of money, both in the getting and the spending. But still in that soft climate, and ever pursuing his own art-studies or his beloved *bricbracquerie*, living a Bohemian life among the Bohemians of all the Italian cities in turn, his temperament was too essentially an artistic one to allow him to be a very miserable man.

"Third son of Lord Lovell," his wife would say, when deploring her husband's evil ways with any sympathizing Englishwoman who came across her path—"third son of Lord Lovell, and connected on his mother's side with the Carstairs; and several delightful livings in the family, if he had only chosen to keep to his profession. And here we live, my dear madam, wandering like felons among Papists and foreigners, and all his beautiful literary talents, that might have won him a name in the pulpit, thrown away. If Archie had only been a boy, as they christened her, one of these livings might be kept in the family yet."

"Yes, if I had only been a boy," Archie would chime in at this point of her stepmother's lamentations,—"if I were only a boy, I'd be an artist, like what papa meant to be; or an actor, or musician, or something of that kind; and make a name for us all yet."

The poor child had been brought up among artists and musicians, and things of that kind; and her ideas of reputation, as of a great many other subjects, were much more artistic than conventional ones.

CHAPTER III.

BRUNE AUX YEUX BLEUS.

Just as the Morteville gossips were returning from their evening amusement on the pier, two young men, Englishmen, issued forth arm-in-arm from the Couronne d'Argent, the principal hotel of the place.

The younger of these men was Gerald Durant, Captain Waters's "good thing" at écarté, the admirer that Morteville tongues had ascribed to Miss Archie Wilson; the elder was Mr Robert Dennison, his first cousin, now on his way back to London after a fortnight in Paris, and at the present moment trying, or seeming to try, to persuade Gerald Durant to start with him to-morrow morning by the first boat for Folkestone.

"If there was anything to make you stop in this disgusting hole I would not ask you, Gerald. But as by your own account you don't know a creature to speak to, and are losing twenty pounds regularly to that scoundrel Waters at écarté, I can't see why you should be obstinate in spoiling my party for me."

Gerald Durant hesitated. "I believe I should do better to go," he said, after a minute or two; "but as to my absence spoiling your party, the thing's absurd. Markham or Drury would come in a moment, and are as ready, either or both of them, to lose their money at loo as I am; anybody in the world you like to ask, in short—except Sholto."

"Markham is out of town; and Lady Lavinia, as you know, never lets that wretched little Drury for a second out of her sight; for Sholto I have no taste—I never had a taste for children. As to losing your money, my dear boy"—Dennison's manner grew genially warm and pleasant—"I don't exactly see the point of the remark. The last time we played loo at my chambers you may remember you landed more than seventy pounds of my money."

"Well, well, I'll go then," said Gerald, in the tone of a man who would rather do anything than be bored to explain why he didn't do it. "It will be better so, I daresay; but I think if you

had seen the face which has been the cause of my lingering on here, you would better appreciate my intention of going away."

"Cause! There is a pretty face in it then, after all?"

"Do you think I should poison myself daily at a Morteville table-d'hôte for the pleasure of losing twenty pounds a night to Captain Waters at écarté?" replied Gerald. "Of course there is a pretty face in it; and of course if I stayed I should come to grief, as I always do."

"As you always do!" remarked Dennison with a laugh. "Gerald, by the way that reminds me—although it really is getting no laughing matter—what is Maggie Hall doing? I have been wanting to ask you this long time. Sir John and all of them are beginning to feel their position awkward."

"*Who?*"

"Maggie Hall, the pretty dairy-maid from Heathcotes. My dear boy, why should you try to have secrets with me?" but his tone was not thoroughly collected as he spoke.

"I think you have asked me about Maggie Hall before, Robert," answered Gerald, coldly; "and I told you then that I knew nothing whatever of her. I never had anything to say to Maggie save in the way of friendship; and you, better than any other man, ought to know it."

And he dropped his friend's arm—they were at the entrance to the pier now,—and walking a step or two aside, gazed intently away across the moonlit sands. In the far distance the shadows of two figures—a man and a girl—cut the path of rippling light that fell across the water and Gerald Durant's face. He knew them to be Archie and her father in a second, and began to vacillate again. How fair the pure girlish face must be looking now! If he waited he could easily contrive to meet her somewhere on their way home, steal a word half in play with her as he had done before, and ask her to meet him once more (every mistake in Gerald's life was prefaced by those fatal words, "once more") at that broken garden-wall to-morrow. Why should he give way always to Dennison? He knew very well that he was wanted as a fifth and as a loser at loo; that Dennison cared no more for his society than he did for the society of any stranger he might see for the first time, who would stake his money uncalculatingly. He

had taken Dennison's advice times enough in his life, and whenever he had done so had repented it. Besides, the easy assumption of superiority in his cousin's last remark had nettled Gerald excessively. Clever as Robert Dennison was, he overshot his mark sometimes. Gerald Durant was his inferior in will and in brain; but Gerald was the last man living to like to have the sense of his own inferiority thrust upon him. Show the hand of iron for a moment, and these weak natures rebel from the touch that they would be unconscious of under the silken glove.

"The steamer starts at eleven sharp," remarked Dennison presently; "you will be able for once to get up early, Gerald, eh?"

"Well, yes, I daresay I shall—if I go," answered Gerald; and then he took out his cigar-case, struck a light, and leaning lazily against the parapet of the pier, began to smoke.

Dennison came beside him and laid his hand kindly on his shoulder. "I see how it all is, Gerald," he remarked carelessly, "and I shall say no more about it. Come or stay just as suits your fancy in the morning. Sir John will be glad enough to see you when you do come, you may be very sure. The poor old man is hotter than ever about your standing for L——; and there is no doubt now as to the nearness of the coming election. Parliament has already got nearer to the end of its prescribed term than usual; and if through any extraordinary vitality, or to serve any special policy of the premier, it should survive the autumn, next May for certain must see it legally terminated. What a career is before you, Gerald," he added, affectionately, "if you could only bring yourself to care about it in earnest!—an heiress as devoted as Lucia destined for you from her cradle; an uncle as lenient as Sir John, bent, whether you will or no, upon bringing you into public life." And while he talked thus Mr Dennison laid his hand within his companion's arm, and gradually led him back into good-temper—no very difficult matter with a man so facile as Gerald—as they strolled slowly onward down the pier.

Let me speak to you of these two men's appearance as they walk together thus. Of Robert Dennison's first. A stranger seeing them in any position side by side would say that Mr Dennison must take precedence in all things, even to the chronicling of the colour of his eyes and the length of his whiskers. His whiskers

were, I believe, what struck you most when you looked at him. They were irreproachable whiskers,—jet black, without one brown or red hair among them; mathematically correct in growth; long, glossy, thick. Men of weak, frivolous character are prone to vacillation in the fashion of their whiskers or beards. Six months in Egypt, a year in Vienna, will upset all the foregone conclusions of these purposeless creatures' lives, and send them back to London regenerate. But from the time when Mr Dennison first attained man's estate till now—and he was past thirty—the cut and length of his whiskers had remained inviolate. All young women in the housemaid line of life who looked at Robert Dennison pronounced him a very fine gentleman indeed. Such critics are not always bad judges. He was a very fine gentleman; over six feet in his stockings, broad-shouldered, deep-voiced, large-limbed. His head was of the bullet-shape, more often seen in Frenchmen than ourselves; his complexion sallow-olive, his nose small, his teeth short, square, and white almost to singularity. So far the catalogue reads favourably. Now for the features which really constitute a human face (the rest are but adjuncts),—the lips and eyes. Mr Dennison had lips that made some fastidious natures shrink away with nameless repugnance only to look at them: full lips, dark in colour, set as granite; the under one slightly projecting, and supported by a heavy coarse-hewn chin. And his eyes were of the worst hue a man's eyes can ever be—black. Through all the infinite gradations of other colours,—through brown, or gray, or green, or (the colour for the gods) blue,—the human soul, whatever there may be of it, shows forth. Only with these black inscrutable orbs does a man look at his fellow-creatures as through a mask. Robert Dennison's eyes were incapacitated, simply by their colour, from giving any softer expression. The broadest sunlight could scarcely evoke a tawny ray from their sombre depths. If you looked at them with closest scrutiny, you could never discern the pupil from the iris; and 'tis precisely in this,—in the shifting colour, in the quick reflection of light, in the sudden dilatation or contraction of the pupil,—that all expression of passion exists. Those who had seen Dennison under the influence of rage—a rare occurrence with him—asserted that his eyes could take a red lurid light, the reverse of agreeable to look at. At all other times they served

him, as he was wont in his genial manner to confess, better than any other pair of eyes in the world could have done—they told no secrets of their master. To an archbishop or an orange-girl, to a judge upon the bench or a beggar, those eyes (*occhi neri, fieri e muti*) would have looked with precisely the same hard unflinching expression. And Mr Dennison was quite right: they suited him.

Gerald Durant was a slight, boyish-looking man of five-and-twenty, with hair of the bright chestnut colour you see surrounding Raphael's softest faces; a fair complexion, that flushed like a girl's as he spoke; and long silky flaxen moustache and whiskers. When he was without his hat (he had taken it off just now, as he stood watching Archie and her father upon the distant sands), the first thing you noticed in him was his beautiful brow. For a moment—until you saw it was a woman's beauty, not a man's—you would have called that forehead, with its low-growing hair, its delicate mouldings, its marble whiteness, intellectual. For a moment, then, you saw the absence of all the ruggedness, all the force that in a man is intellect. In his youth, a man with a head like this will give promise of great things, and at five-and-thirty he will be living in a villa at Richmond still. His eyes were gray; great speaking eyes, that softened and changed colour if a woman took his hand, or a burst of music smote his ear. His nose and mouth were of the cast Vandyke has taught us to identify with our weakest race of kings; and his chin—at once the characteristic, the index of every face—was characterless. For the rest, his make, although slight, was far from effeminate. Intense desire of excitement was Gerald Durant's master-passion; and he was wise enough to know that field-sports, alternating with the life of cities, are the most epicurean sort of excitement that a civilized man can take. As a boy, he had been stroke-oar of one of the boats and captain of the eleven at Eton: in later years he had been openly called the boldest rider to hounds in her Majesty's Guards. And any man who is a good rider, and who can handle an oar well, will have his chest well developed. His graceful hands were far too brown and manly-looking to allow a suspicion of dandyism, and his dress was plain and English almost to affectation. At the present moment (and while Robert Dennison, with a high hat, lavender gloves, swell boots, and frock-coat, looked ready for a wedding)

Gerald was in a brown velveteen morning suit, a spun-silk shirt, a Tyrolean hat, and gloveless. "The Guards only dress when they are on duty," he had answered, when Dennison had chaffed him as to his style of costume. "In Bond Street I do what you are doing now; at all other times I suit myself."

And noting what the undress really was,—how becoming in its picturesque Bohemianism, how studied in every detail of its seeming carelessness,—Mr Dennison had smiled, but not with his lips, at the answer. All the weakness of Gerald Durant's character lay in it; and nothing yielded Mr Dennison more intense satisfaction than analyzing any new trait of weakness in the men he called his friends.

Towards the middle of the pier they were joined by Waters, who had freed himself from his Morteville asscciates the moment he saw the two Englishmen approaching. Dennison had already made his acquaintance that day at the table-d'hote, and began talking to him at once with the kindly tone of encouragement which for some years past it had been his habit to show to all the men or women who preyed upon his cousin Gerald.

"For a few weeks this must be an amusing life to lead, Captain Waters, especially to any one who makes cosmopolitan human nature his study, as I have no doubt you do. I have been on the pier twenty minutes, and have already seen queerer specimens of Britons—male and female—than I ever did during the last fortnight on the Boulevards; and that is saying a good deal."

"Well, they certainly are a tolerably shady lot," answered Waters, with a shrug of his shoulders; "the residents in the place especially. People a shade too bad in character for the Channel Islands—and without ready-money enough to take them to Florence—settle down in Morteville; and a pretty subsidiary stratum they make. The fun is to see them pulling each other to pieces. Women without a shred of reputation between them sitting in judgment on a little girl like this Archie Wilson, as I have heard old O'Rourke, Maloney, and Company doing during the last half hour."

At the name of Archie, Gerald Durant turned his face quickly towards Waters, and Robert Dennison noted the gesture.

"Who is O'Rourke, and what is Archie, Captain Waters?" he

asked. "I have rather a fancy when I travel of picking up little everyday bits of watering-place scandal."

"O'Rourke is a decently-successful fifth-class adventuress, who manages to keep herself at the head of the Morteville society. Archie is the daughter of an uncommonly shady Englishman, called Wilson, who has been living here for the last year; she is the prettiest girl in the place; and divides her time equally between running about on the trottoir and smoking cigarettes at an open window late of an evening; a very nice little girl, in short. Nothing but laziness has made *me* neglect her up to the present time."

And Captain Waters smiled significantly. He was implying even a blacker falsehood than he told. Archie Wilson's time was not divided between the trottoir and the consumption of tobacco, although the girl did occasionally walk about the Morteville streets, and in the course of her life had pretended to smoke about half-a-dozen of her own father's cigarettes. On Captain Waters she would have looked (as he knew) with about as much favour as on one of the waiters at the Couronne d'Argent. But what is a trifling statement involving a young girl's fame to a gentleman of his profession in the prosecution of business? Gerald Durant must be detained at Morteville, and according to his lights he (Waters) was doing his best to detain him there.

"And what opinion does the Morteville world pass upon this young person?" Durant asked, after a moment or two. "Do they hit her harder than you do, Waters; or are the trottoir and the tobacco-smoke the worst things that can be brought against her?"

"Oh, as to that," cried Waters, jauntily, but he did not thoroughly understand Durant's tone, "if you come to facts, I daresay the little girl is about the honestest of the whole lot. She runs about alone all day long, and makes eyes at all the men she meets; but what can you expect from a child brought up in such a way as she is, and in such places as these?"

"And she is handsome, doubtless!" suggested Dennison; "as all the other women fall foul of her."

"Handsome? Well, no. She'll be a very well-made woman—good hands and feet, and a fine waist, and all that; but lanky at present, and sunburnt."

"I differ from you entirely, Captain Waters," interrupted Gerald Durant. "I know Miss Wilson slightly; and I think she's very handsome; one of the most handsome girls I ever saw in my life."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, Durant," cried Waters, laughing. He had a trick of calling men by their names at once, however studiously they gave him his title of "Captain" in return. "If I had known that you were an acquaintance of Mademoiselle Archie, I would have been more discreet. Well, she is a very pretty little girl, and not a bit faster, I daresay, although less careful, than her neighbours. Of course, as you have the pleasure of knowing Miss Wilson, you will stop for the public ball to-morrow night? If you do, you should tell me now, and I will get you a ticket. None by strict right are issued after to-day.—That is the time," he added carelessly to Dennison, "to see all our Morteville world at its best. If you care for seeing shady British nature in its full-dress, you ought to stay yourself and go to it."

The hint was carelessly enough thrown out; but it worked as Waters hoped and intended it should work upon Gerald Durant. The fancy rose before him in a moment of Archie; not a little girl running wild as he had seen her hitherto, but flushed, and radiant, and coquettish, in a light ball-dress—a woman, not a child. He felt the slight lithe figure yielding in his arms as he danced with her. He saw the mocking face turned up again with its bewitching nameless charm to his. What did it matter whether his cousin Lucia fretted a little at his absence or not? What did it matter if, for a short time longer, he let things take their course as best they might, without let or hindrance of his? The intoxication of a new fancy was in fact upon him. And it was no custom of Gerald Durant's to cast away the chance of any new emotion for the sake of graver and less pleasant interests.

"You are sure about this ball on Tuesday, I suppose?" he said to Waters when, half-an-hour later, they were separating at the entrance to the hotel. "I mean, you are sure that all the English will be going to it."

"I know that all the O'Rourke set will go," answered Waters; "also Miss Wilson and her mother; for I heard it discussed this evening."

"Oh, well, you may get me a ticket for it, then. I believe I will stop and see the shady Britons in the full-dress that you speak of."

"And I am to bear your excuses to Sir John and Lucia?" remarked Dennison, when Waters left them. "Gerald, when will you cease, I wonder, to run about after every pair of foolish eyes that chance to meet you in the street?"

Durant looked up quickly at his cousin's face; but its expression was more calmly unmoved than ever in the brilliant moonlight.

"With so much at stake, my dear boy," he went on persuasively, "how can you allow another week to pass without showing yourself at home? I can assure you the time has past for looking upon Sir John's suspicions as a laughing matter. I had a letter from him the day before I left Paris, and really his fierce messages to you are—"

"Matters that concern me, and me alone," interrupted Gerald, with his boyish laugh. "I can understand Sir John being savage under the combined influences of gout and of his own most ridiculous mistake; but why should you be so careful about me, *mon cousin?* I can't hurt you, whatever I do; indeed, I've often thought what a pity it is I don't go utterly to the bad at once, and leave you to a quiet walk over. You're a much better man than I am in business; and you've got settled political views, which constituents like; and altogether you'd make a vastly steadier heir for Sir John than I ever shall. How about trying it on? I am going to stop here. Most probably I'll get into some mess or other with Mdlle Archie. How about your taking the initiative, and suggesting to the home-powers that Mr Robert Dennison would be a much more fitting person to receive the intended honours than his scapegrace cousin, Gerald Durant? It's worth thinking of, eh?"

To have our own cherished intentions suddenly put into words by the man one purposes to wrong is not a pleasant experience. Robert Dennison was neither weak nor sensitive, nor a conscientious man in the ordinary sense of the word; but he was (like most men off the boards of transpontine theatres) human; and an answer came by no means fluently from his lips.

"I—I am the last man living, my dear Gerald,—the last man

living to supplant you with Sir John; and as to Lucia, I believe our dislike for each other is tolerably mutual. What could put such a preposterous idea into your head?"

. . . "Brune aux yeux bleus! Why, I do believe it is Archie again," was Gerald's answer. "Yes, there she goes, following the old man up from the pier. If the child hasn't a walk! Robert, tell me if you ever saw a better one among the handsomest women in Seville? Why, from here you could swear to the foot she must have. No woman ever walks like that who hasn't a foot arched, small, and firm withal, like a Spanish woman's—

> 'Si je vous le disais, pourtant, que je vous aime,
> Qui sait, brune aux yeux bleus, ce que vous en diriez?'

I shall run the risk at all events;" and in another moment, but with an innocent, indolent air, not at all that of a human creature in pursuit of anything, Gerald Durant was following the steps, at about twenty yards' distance, of the two figures he had pointed out to Dennison.

When he had progressed a few steps, he turned and saw that his cousin was still watching him. "Good-night, Robert," he cried, cheerily; "good-bye, if I don't see you again; give my love to Lucia; and say I shall certainly be back at the end of the week.

> 'Si je vous le disais qu'une douce folie
> A fait de moi votre ombre et m'attache à vos pieds?'"

And he went on singing half-aloud De Musset's immortal song,—Lucia, his constituency, Sir John, his debts, his hopes—everything else forgotten—until he had followed Archie to within twenty yards of her own house.

CHAPTER IV.

ARCHIE.

She was a tall slip of a girl, with a waist that you could span; long-limbed, and with enough of childishness about her still to give her that nameless grace that never quite comes back to any

woman in her full maturity. In her best black silk—the second dress she had had of regulation length—and a bonnet, walking demurely by her father's side to church, Archie Lovell looked a grown-up young lady; in her sailor-hat and gingham suit, running wild about the Morteville beach of a morning, she looked a child, and a very wicked child too. Her hair (that Mrs Maloney called red) was always, save under the Sunday bonnet, left to hang upon her shoulders, as girls of twelve wear it in England—Mr Lovell averring that it was a sin to let paddings, or pins, or artifice of any kind come near it; and I think he was right. Now that lime- and lemon-juice blanche our women's hair, and that auricomus and other fluids bring it back to yellow or red, one gets sceptical on the subject of gold-tinted locks; but Archie's were of a hue that all the *artistes* in London could never so much as imitate: nut-brown in shade, red-gold in sunshine, supple, plenteous, exquisitely soft, rich, and "kiss-worthy," to use the word of some old poet, always. Her face was a charming one—sunburnt almost to the darkness of her hair, with coal-black pencilled brows, small nose, rather more inclining to *retroussé* than the girl herself liked; a mouth too large for a heroine, but excellent for a woman—having white short teeth; the perfection of colouring; and that square cut about the corners of the lips that renders any mouth at once passionate and intellectual—the mouth of a poet. Her hands were browner ever than her face, but small, strong, and delicately modelled; and her eyes?—ah, here was the crowning fascination of the whole. With dark eyes Archie would have been a pretty sparkling brunette, probably—such a woman as you admire for an evening, and then lose among all the other women of the same colour in your memory; but once see Archie Lovell's blue eyes shining from that brown face, and eyes and face sunk in on your remembrance for ever. They were blue to singularity, like some of those Italian eyes that occasionally startle you just on this side of the Apennines: sapphire-blue to their very depths, with crystal-clear iris; and thick lashes—rich, black, and curling up, as you see sometimes on a young child. Could those eyes soften or fill with passion, or were exquisite form and colour all their beauty? No one knew. Archie was a child till last Thursday; and all the expressions her face had worn as yet had been intensely childish

ones: rage, when anything vexed herself or her father; pleasure over a new frock; mischievous delight at "taking rises" out of her simple stepmother; and saucy devil-may-carishness—(I have searched in vain for a loftier expression, but everything heroic is so out of place in speaking of Archie),—saucy devil-may-carishness towards the whole of the Anglo-Morteville population—the female portion of it especially—at all times and seasons when she came across their path.

Till last Thursday. Last Thursday she made the acquaintance of Gerald Durant. He was walking—bored, and trying to kill the hours that hung wearily before the boat sailed—along one of the back-streets of the town, when suddenly he came upon the vision of Archie's face,—a vision destined to haunt his memory through many an after year. She was perched up, not in a wholly lady-like position, on a villanous broken wall that bounded the garden of their landlady's house; no hat on, the wonderful hair hanging loose down her shoulders; a striped blue-and-white shirt, confined round the waist by a strap like a boy's; and a paraphernalia of oil-paints beside her on the wall; for, in her way, Archie had painted ever since she could stand alone. For some minutes she was unconscious of Durant's approach, and worked quietly on at the dead colouring of her sketch, while he stood and fell in love with her. Then he came nearer; and she saw and nodded to him. He was dressed in the same velveteen suit and mountaineer's hat that you have seen him in on the pier; and Archie, unversed in Guardsmen, took him in full faith for a Wanderbursch, and wished him good day in patois German,—a language that she had learnt beautifully three years before among the mountains of Tyrol. He answered in excellent Anglo-Hanoverian, and the girl's cosmopolitan ear told her in a second he was an Englishman. She looked at his hands next; saw he was no Wanderbursch—and blushed crimson? No, reader. In the course of this story I will not once write conventionalities respecting Archie. She blushed not one shade, but began to laugh at the pronunciation, excellent though it was, of the stranger's German; and three minutes later Gerald had seen her sketch, and was standing chatting to her as freely as if they had just been introduced and waltzed together for the first

time at a ball, or undergone any other formal introduction, within the sacred precincts of propriety and social decorum.

They talked on for an hour or more, Archie ever and anon putting in a stroke or two at her unfinished sketch (it was during this time, no doubt, that Gussy Marks espied them); then a French *bonne* appeared at the back-door of the house, who shouted out to mademoiselle across the length of the garden that dinner was served; and Durant bowed himself away.

He was as much *épris* as he had ever been in his life. His nature had become a good deal French by frequent residences in Paris and other Gallican influences, and French words best describe many of his moods. Not really in love of course—do Guardsmen ever fall in love?—not flattered, not struck with the desire of hunting down a credit-giving quarry, as was generally the case in Mr Durant's flirtations—but *épris*. Those blue eyes, that lithe and graceful form, had won his sense of beauty. That unabashed tongue—so childish, yet so keenly shrewd—had stimulated as much intellectual zest as it was in him to feel about a woman. Who and what was this girl, dressed like a boy, painting like an artist, talking like a well-born woman of five-and-twenty, and looking like a lovely child of sixteen?—this young person whose speech would not have discredited a duchess, but who sat perched on the wall of a Morteville back-street, and who nodded and talked to the first stranger who passed her in the road?

He went back to his hotel, told his valet to unpack his things, and in the evening amused himself by losing his money at écarté to Captain Waters. The next morning early he was on the sands; and Miss Lovell was there also, with her father.

She looked at him as she passed, and he raised his hat—Mr Lovell doing the same mechanically, and without as much as looking at him; and Durant's vanity was wounded on the spot. The girl did not look conscious, nor the father distrustful. What a fool he had been to think for ten minutes of the stupid little bourgeoise,—a blue-eyed pert young woman, who doubtless planted herself daily on that wall with the express purpose of flirting with any barber or bagman who might chance to pass along the street!

He walked back to his hotel; told his valet to repack his port-

manteau at once, and then—then on his way to the pier met Archie (on her road home for a forgotten sketch-book), and stopped and talked to her once more.

She was looking her best—better than she had done the day before—in a fresh white dress, skirt and jacket alike, a sailor-hat bound with a bit of blue ribbon, neat peau-de-Suède gloves, perfect little laced boots, and a bunch of honeysuckle in her breast. Gerald got leave to carry her book for her (told his long-suffering valet, whom he passed upon the pier, hot with indignation, to take back his things to the hotel), and when he left Miss Lovell within fifty yards of her father on the beach, had made up his mind, as much as he ever made up his mind, to look upon it as a settled affair that he should lose his head about her. This was two days ago. He had seen her and walked with her on the sands more than once since; and Archie was a child no longer. She was not a whit in love with Mr Durant,—her heart was as unstirred really as a moorland pool, upon whose surface the imaged flitting clouds give a semblance of agitation; but she had received the deference —had listened to the implied flatteries of a man learned in the science of woman-pleasing, and her imagination, her vanity, her zest in life, her life itself, had got a new and delicious stimulus. She was a child no longer!

The Rue d'Artois was dead silent as Mr Lovell and his daughter entered their house; and when a few minutes later Gerald, his cigar in his mouth, passed carelessly up the street under the shadow of the opposite houses, he could hear Miss Archie's voice, clear and ringing on the silent night-air.

Mr Lovell's apartment was on the rez-de-chaussée. The windows and shutters were wide open, and the light of a lamp upon the supper-table showed the family-group with perfect distinctness to any passer-by who chose to look at them from the street.—Mrs Lovell prim and upright at one end of the table; Mr Lovell's stooping form and pre-occupied face at the other. Close beside him, radiant in her white dress and with her shining hair, Archie; and walking familiarly about, attending on them, Jeanneton, the great good-humoured French peasant woman, who formed the cook, housemaid, and butler of the Honourable Frederick Lovell's present establishment.

"Fifteen francs is certainly an enormous price," said Miss Lovell, addressing her stepmother with that air of intense indignation seldom seen in women, save where apparel is concerned,—"but they would be the making of the whole dress. A plain white tarlatan is the best taste in the world for me,—I want nothing better; but then the adjuncts should be perfect. My gloves I'm sure of, for I tried them on early this morning, when my hands were cold; and my wreath will do. But my—no; I don't like to think of it even,—they *would* make such an addition."

"When I was a girl black slippers were very much worn with white dresses," said Mrs Lovell; "and very nice they used to look. I was at a ball given by the Honourable Mr Rawston, of Raby Castle; and the three ladies Vernon were there in white gauze—"

"And black shoes!" interrupted Archie, pertly. "Yes, Bettina, that is all very well, but I'm not one of the ladies Vernon—I'm Archie Wilson; and all the old Morteville ladies hate me; and I wish—yes, I do—to be the prettiest girl at the ball. And if I could have these—well, it's no use talking of it—but if I could, it would just make the difference in my whole dress. I wonder whether M. Joubert would take fourteen francs if I offered it to him—money down?"

"Money down, my dear!" cried Mr Lovell, waking up suddenly. "What is it that you are talking of? Money down! My dear Archie, whatever you do, never fall into any of these horrible innovations. Money down!"

"It would be a great innovation if we were to put it into practice," cried Archie, who evidently was accustomed to make her opinions known in the household. "But for once in my life, father, I do wish I could pay ready-cash. That cruel wretch of an old Joubert, why should he refuse credit any more than any other tradesman? And the only ones that fit me in the place!—I declare I've half a mind to pawn my ear-rings, and have them. Better be without trinkets of any kind than wear black shoes and a white dress. I hate the thought of it!" and turning up her animated face across her shoulder,—all of which pantomime Gerald was watching,—Miss Lovell here communicated her grief in French to Jeanneton, who immediately broke forth in a loud chorus of indignation and sympathy. Why, even at a ball at the Marie she

(Jeanneton) had worn white shoes. Black shoes and a white dress for mademoiselle at mademoiselle's first ball, monsieur! And Jeanneton extended her clasped hands deprecatingly towards monsieur, as though he were a monster of domestic tyranny about to force his innocent child into a convent, or a marriage of convenience. "Mademoiselle's first ball!" reiterated Jeanneton, imploringly.

"But why?—but what do you all mean? Why should not the child have these black boots?"

"White! white! white!" cried Archie, immensely excited.

"Well, then, white boots, if she wishes them. Are not white boots the correct thing for young women to wear at balls?" he continued, addressing Mrs Lovell: "if they are, let her have them by all means. Poor little Archie!" And he stretched his arm out and stroked her hair caressingly.

If Archie had expressed a wish for a set of diamonds and a white satin dress, Mr Lovell would have said, "let her have them;" and the girl shot a quick look of sapient intelligence towards her stepmother. "Don't enlighten him," the look said: "don't tell him our reputation is so bad M. Joubert won't let me have a pair of white satin slippers on credit—don't tell him we have only just francs enough to last out next week, and that by dint of somewhat short dinners towards the close of it." Then aloud, "Ah, dear papa, you never deny me anything," she said; "and you'll see if I won't do you credit to-morrow evening—shoes and all. I do hope the young men will pay me attention," she added, quitting the subject of money now that her father had roused himself enough to take part in it. "I only know three; and that's not many to look to for twenty-one dances, is it? Even if they all ask me twice—which one can't be sure of—there's six, and fifteen to sit out. Bettina, I hope I sha'n't sit out fifteen dances."

"Well, my dear, I hope not; but there's never any saying,—men are so capricious. I remember once when I was young—"

"Ah, but that was very different. The Marquis of Tweedle never asked you at all after dancing nine times running with you the night before; but people like M. Gounod are not likely to be capricious. Do you think I could calculate with certainty on M. Gounod asking me three times now?"

M. Gounod was a little French doctor—a bachelor of forty—

greatly sought after by all the female population of Morteville; and Mrs Lovell answered that she thought Archie might certainly rely on a dance with him—a dance perhaps at the end of the evening. As to thinking he could dance with little girls before midnight, with the Maire's two daughters, and the Sous-préfet's wife, and all his influential patients, in the room, it was absurd; unless, indeed, they went very early, and he gave her a quadrille before the other ladies had arrived.

"A pleasant prospect for me!" cried Archie, with a real tremor in her voice, and real tears rising in her eyes; "and after lying awake for nights and nights thinking of this ball, and how jealous I would make old Gussy Marks and all of them by my successes! If—if——" but the supposition lapsed into silence; "if Mr Durant would only stay and go to it," was what she thought; but for about the first time in her life she felt a shyness at putting her thought into words.

"If little Willy Montacute asks me, I'll dance away half the night with him, at all events," she finished,—after a minute or two. "Anything would be better than sitting by and seeing other people enjoy themselves." And then Miss Lovell took a vigorous heap of *fricandeau* of veal, a goodly pile of salad, an addition of cherry *compote* (she was quite cosmopolitan in her taste for sauces), a gigantic slice of the loaf, and began her supper.

Gerald watched her robust appetite with admiration. The young person he could least love on the earth—her he was engaged to marry—had, before men, a trick of dallying with her food, which exasperated him singularly. What did girls go in for when they abstained from food? Intellectual charms?—the cleverest people eat the most. Physical ones?—to be handsome, the frame of any animal must be well nourished. No such illogical human creature was before him now; but a young woman eating her supper as heartily as a man—ay, and helping herself ever and anon to fresh condiments, and finally to more veal and another trench of bread; and, as I have said, Mr Durant's admiration increased enormously as he watched her.

When the supper-table was at length cleared by Jeanneton, Mrs Lovell reminded her step-daughter in a very serious tone what day of the week it was.

"Sunday evening, Archie, my dear,—Sunday evening, you know."

"Well, Bettina, what of it! Jeanneton may clear the things away on Sunday evening, mayn't she, without sin?"

"Archie dear, for shame! A young girl should never use words of that sort. You know on Sunday evening I always like to attend to our services. We shall have just time for a good quiet reading now before bed-time."

"Not to-night, Bettina,—not to-night," said the girl, gravely, and coming so abruptly to the window that Durant half thought she must have caught a glimpse of his figure before he drew away quickly into deeper shadow. "It isn't that I dislike the readings," she added, in a voice that utterly disarmed poor little foolish Bettina; "when I'm in the mood, I like them better than anything else, I do; but I'm not in the mood to-night; and I won't pretend to read David's grand old words, and all the time be thinking of white-satin shoes and M. Joubert, and my chances of partners at the ball. A cigarette and a walk by moonlight would be much more suitable to my present state of mind."

"Not a cigarette, Archie,—not a cig—"

"Bettina, child, please go to bed, and don't mind me. If I think a cigarette would do me good, I shall smoke one, you may be sure. Now, good night."

"Well, then, Archie, don't put on—you know what I mean. It was very well for once, but you are getting too old for these tricks now; and let Jeanneton sit at the window, at all events." And then, having apologized away her lecture into simple acquiescence, as usual, Mrs Lovell lit her bed-candle and went away; and Archie and her father were left alone.

He came up and put his arm round her shoulder. A great gaunt man Durant could see he was, in the moonlight, with narrow stooping shoulders, white delicate hands, and a pale absent-looking, intellectual face.

"Archie, my love, Bettina is right—don't go out again as you did last night."

"O, papa, it was such fun!—and knowing all the stories the old ladies would make up; and it was only your coat and hat, papa, after all."

"But still it pained me, Archie,—it pained me when you told us of it."

"I won't do it then. I'll never do it again." Very quick and decided she said this. "Poor little papa, you have quite enough to trouble you without me."

And Mr Gerald Durant, who was not over-burdened with household affections, felt oddly at seeing her take her father's hand and hold it tenderly up against her cheek.

"If you like, I'll go up at once and help Bettina with the reading," she added, after a minute or two.

"Well, well—that's quite another thnig," answered Mr Lovell. "Bettina is a most admirable woman. I'm sure you and I owe her everything, Archie; but her theology is—well, let us say her weakest point—a thing to be accepted, not argued about. To persist in Dissenting manuals, as she does, when all the noblest works of our Church are open to her! No, Archie, I must say I do not care how often you miss poor Bettina's readings."

The theological difference between her father and his wife had been long patent to Archie; and from the time she was six years old she had known how to make discreet use of them on occasion.

"And you'll make me a cigarette or two before you go?" (Mr Lovell had a sanctum in which he always spent the early hours of the night.) "Ah, do, papa; it's so jolly to sit here and smoke in the moonlight."

"But you don't like it, Archie?" said Mr Lovell, as he took out his tobacco and prepared mechanically to obey her. "I can tell by your face, miss, you don't really like your cigarettes a bit."

"Well—*like?*" answered Archie, reflectively; "like?—no. I don't suppose I do like the taste, any more than I like the feel of a bonnet; but still I'm quite ready to wear a bonnet on Sunday. It's the ideas of things, I believe, not the things themselves, that are nice—don't you think so, papa?"

"Yes, Archie," he answered, quietly. "And 'tis in the pursuit of the 'ideas of things,' not of things themselves, that men's lives waste away—like mine."

"O, father!—waste away?"

"Waste away, child—and leave no trace, either for bad or good, as they waste."

Archie was silent; and gave a long and wistful look at her father's face. Vaguely it came into her head to speculate whether this was truth indeed that he had spoken; whether a life spent in dreams does not, in the very things left undone, leave as palpable a record of itself—more palpable oftentimes—than a life of activity and work? But she made no answer. A sort of instinct told her that it was better Mr Lovell should believe his failures to be harmless ones at least. And, with their money frittered away, herself and her education neglected, their position—ay, and at times the common comforts of life—gone too, the poor child, with premature womanly tact, had long since learnt to be silent whenever Mr Lovell sentimentalized about himself and his failures.

"You will have finished 'Troy' in a few weeks, papa; and then there will be no more talk of failure. I am certain, quite certain, you will get a good price for it in London."

"Troy" was an enormous and very ambitious landscape, that Mr Lovell had been working at for years. It was a wonderful combination of such red, purple, and green, as nature never painted yet upon the face of creation; but dear to Mr Lovell's heart as ever "Carthage" was to Turner, or, perhaps a juster simile, as "The Banishment of Aristides" to poor Haydon.

To Archie this picture was like a brother or sister. It had grown with her growth—every great event of her life, since she was a child of seven, seemed, in one way or another, to be connected with "Troy;" and now that it was within a few weeks of completion, when the artist himself said that more thought, more finish, *could* not be given to this masterpiece of his life, his daughter's heart fevered tumultuously over its prospects of success or of failure. Childish though the girl was in most other things, in everything pertaining to money her life had already forced her to be wise. Mr Lovell estimated (who shall say by what tariff?) that "Troy" must fetch five hundred guineas at least. Five hundred guineas would enable them to pay off the creditors from whom they had run away—for Mr Lovell in his heart was honest still—to cast aside this incognito that Archie detested so cordially, and to start afresh. (Starting afresh was a process they had passed through—hitherto by the sacrifice of capital—about every year since her birth.) Yes; and suppose "Troy" did not sell? Sup-

pose the picture-buyers in London did not think those marvellous ruby purples more like to nature than Archie in her inmost heart did here in Morteville-sur-Mer? Long after her father had left her, Miss Lovell stood pondering these things; the cigarettes still lying upon the window-sill, the ball, the white satin shoes, Mr Durant himself, forgotten; and when suddenly a figure emerged into the light close before her, for a second or two she did not even recognize him.

"Miss Lovell, I am afraid I have startled you," he remarked, as she drew instinctively away from the window, and half hid herself behind the curtain.

"Ah, Mr Durant! is it you? Well, for a moment I certainly did not know you. I was far away from Morteville—just then—day-dreaming, as I've a dreadful habit of doing." And then she held out her hand—that little bit of a sunburnt hand, whose modelled proportions were already so graven upon Gerald's memory—and gave it him.

Affairs were progressing, thought Mr Durant; the girl had never shaken hands with him before. The papa and mamma retire, and mademoiselle, surprised in a pretty *pose* in the moonlight, gave her hand to him, and returned his pressure heartily. Now was the time to begin serious love-making at once.

Which conclusion shows that a Guardsman, weighted even with seven seasons' experience, may make desperate mistakes occasionally about matters wherein his own vanity is concerned.

CHAPTER V.

A CIGAR BY MOONLIGHT.

Archie Lovell seated herself like a child upon the sill of the open window, leant forth her face full where Maloney, had she been there, could have seen it, and told Mr Durant at once, and without any reserve, that he might go on with his cigar while he talked to her. Mind it?—not a bit. Her father smoked all day and all night long. She had been brought up since she was a

baby among people who smoked. Why Bettina, who looked upon a cigar as a capital crime once, had got actually to feel lonely without the smell of smoke now.

"And who is Bettina?" asked Gerald, thinking that domestic confidences would be the kind of conversation most calculated to put the girl at her ease with him.

"Bettina is my father's second wife," answered Archie promptly —"Elizabeth, really; but he disliked the name so much, that a German friend thought of Bettina for him—and the most ill-used, long-suffering step-mother in the world. I was three when she came to us,—I am seventeen now; and during these fourteen years I have turned every hair of her head from black to white. Poor little Bettina!"

"Are you so very wicked, then, Miss Wilson?" Gerald asked; "I should not have thought so, I am sure."

"O, I was an awfully wicked child, I think," answered Archie; "and then I believe I really did take every disease under the sun —Bettina says so, at all events—also that I got into more accidents than any other child extant. Now, of course, it's different. There are no more diseases, as she says, that I can take, and I am too careful and a great deal too fond of myself to get into accidents; so really a good deal of the poor little woman's responsibility is taken away."

The balls had broken in Durant's favour. He could open the first battery of flirtation in an easy orthodox fashion, and without the wearisome necessity of any more of those dreary family histories.

"No other disorder that you can possibly take? I should hardly think that, Miss Wilson, at your age."

"Well, of course, I don't mean cholera or the plague" ("You matter-of-fact young Briton!" interpolated Archie mentally), "but childish ailments—hooping-cough, measles, scarlet-fever, and all the rest of it. Do you understand now?"

"And you don't admit the possibility of any but bodily ailments, then? You don't recognize the existence of mental sufferings?—disappointed hopes, broken hearts—"

"Oh, I've much too good a digestion for any nervous affection of that kind," she interrupted with a laugh. "Papa says I shall

never know anything about the usual griefs of civilized young women, as long as my magnificent appetite and digestion remain to me."

If the fence was unconscious, it was none the less effective. Gerald saw that he was a great deal farther than he had thought from sentiment still, and resolved for the present to follow rather than lead.

"Civilized young women! Don't you consider yourself as belonging to civilization, then?"

"Hardly, Mr Durant; or only in the same sort of way that gipsies do. Now, look;" she just touched his sleeve with her hand, and leant her face forward confidentially to his; "look here; as long as I can remember anything, we've been living about in Italy, but never longer in any place than a year or so at a time. We have always been much too poor for any English people to want to know us, and my father's friends everywhere have been artists—artists, and actors, and musicians, and republicans, and all those sorts of men, you know. For the rest, we generally know our butcher and our baker—till our credit gets too bad for us to want to keep up the acquaintance—and occasionally the English parson, but not his wife or daughters, to bow to; sometimes the doctor; and that's about the extent of our dealings with the Philistines. I've never been to school; I haven't an accomplishment belonging to me, except dancing (which I learnt by instinct, I suppose); and I've scarcely known an English child to speak to since I was born. Now, am I civilized or not?"

"Very," answered Gerald laconically, and looking long at the refined high-bred face so close to him there, alone at this hour and by this light; yet fenced round, divinely shielded, by its own unconsciousness of evil as few faces had ever seemed to him in London ball-rooms. "You have been in Rome, of course, among all the other Italian cities?" he remarked, as the girl returned his look with a thorough want of embarrassment, that to him was more singularly embarrassing than any shyness would have been.

"Yes, we actually lived in Rome for nearly two years once; and we looked upon it as head-quarters, or home, all the time we were in Italy. It is home to papa, I think; or more home than anywhere else could ever be."

"The Roman artist-life suited him, I suppose?"

"Ah, no, Mr Durant. His heart is in Rome—just that!"

The colour ebbed up into Archie Lovell's face; her breast heaved. "Mamma is buried there, you know," she whispered, in a suddenly softened tone. "She was quite a girl when papa married her, and she died a year after their marriage. He has really never lifted up his head since. All his pictures and his poems—poor papa!—even I myself, are nothing compared to her and that one year they lived together. I used to feel miserably jealous, Mr Durant, at the number of hours he would spend sitting beside her grave in Rome; and I hope I shall never go back there to be made jealous any more. All the years he has had me ought to be more to him than that one little year with her. And yet," she added in a minute, and with another subtle change of voice, "I can understand it all. I should feel the same myself. Mamma was everything to him."

Here, then, was the subject of love fairly brought upon the carpet—the girl's own capacity, not for love only, but for passionate overwhelming love, openly acknowledged; and still Gerald Durant felt that he was as remote from intimacy with her as though the Alps divided them. No woman, learned or unlearned, ever paved the way to facile flirtation by making such a declaration as this. The siege, if siege it were to be, must be a long one, ending possibly—already he estimated Archie truly enough to know this—not as his flirtations had ended hitherto, but in his own utter defeat and subjugation. If this girl's changeful wooing voice had once got fairly round his heart,—if those little hands once held him in absolute thrall, he knew himself, in some mad hour, to be quite capable of marrying her. And to marry any woman save the one destined for him would be, in his fettered position, simply to throw life up of his own free will. Lucia Durant he must take for his wife, no matter whether other faces were fairer to his sight, other voices sweeter to his ear.

Marry! Heaven, where was his imagination leading him? and what was this girl but a pretty precocious child, whom it was pleasant to play at love-making with here in the moonlight, possibly dance half the night with at the Morteville ball to-morrow, and then go away and forget? And he looked at her again, and saw

that the child was prettier far than he had ever given her credit for, with her great blue eyes softening, half in tears, and the full-cut mouth trembling : thought, feeling—yes, dormant passion even —stirring over all the flower-like childish face.

"Your father is a happy man, Miss Archie, whatever else he has lost."

"Why, please?"

"He has got you."

"He has ; and a precious trouble and anxiety I have been to him," she answered, going back abruptly to her usual manner. "How in the world did you know I was called Archie?"

"I—I—well, really I don't know. Did you never tell me so yourself?" He could not for his life have brought his lips to say that Waters had spoken of her.

"Perhaps. I don't remember. But however you heard it, once would be enough, I'm sure, to impress it on your mind. Did you ever hear such a name for a girl in your life before? 'Archie!' And it's not a diminutive, not a pet name ; I was christened it. Shall I tell you how? When I was five or six weeks old, my mother dead, and poor papa in his worst grief, some English ladies who lived in the house took it into their heads I ought to be christened, and teased him as to what my name was to be. He says he remembers he pushed a book of my mother's across the table, and said 'her name,' and left them. It had been a gift of her brother's, and had these words written in it: 'Pauline, from Archie.' Well, of course I don't know what these excellent women thought, or how they managed it, but at all events they chose the most English of the two, and I was christened Archie instead of Pauline, as papa meant. Do you hate it?"

"On the contrary," answered Gerald, "I like the name infinitely, because no woman I have known before has borne it."

"I am glad of that. I think sometimes my name alone would set people against me, even if I didn't look so much like a boy, and smoke cigarettes, and—"

"Miss Wilson! you don't mean to tell me you smoke—actually smoke? No, no. Impossible."

"I assure you I do. Here are two cigarettes papa made for me just now. Are you shocked?"

"Fearfully."

"What! did you never see a young lady smoke in your life before?" cried the girl, looking intensely amused.

"Never," answered Gerald, with the air of a Quaker. "I have lived among good, demure, quiet young ladies, I can assure you—young ladies who have never seen a cigar, save by accident, and don't know the meaning of the word pipe."

"Oh, dear, how good they must be, and not at all tiring to live with! Is it one of their portraits you wear in that locket *par hasard?*" making this unexpected home-thrust with the thorough audacity of a child; "if it is, show it me. I should like to see how good, demure, quiet young ladies look who never saw a cigar, except by accident."

Without a word, Gerald disengaged the locket from his chain, and Archie seized hold of it and ran off eagerly to the lamp. A strong magnifier of Mr Lovell's was lying on the table; and after opening the locket and finding that it did contain a photograph, and a photograph of a girl's face, Archie examined it through the glass with eager attention. For a moment something in the expression of the portrait repulsed her strongly; then her artistic eye discerned the accurate statuesque proportions of the features, the classic cut of the small head, the soft moulding of the fair and stately neck; and finally, with a sinking of the heart utterly beyond her own power of analyzation, she felt herself bound to acknowledge that this woman, whose portrait Gerald Durant wore on his breast, was beautiful.

All Archie's foregone beliefs in herself seemed revolutionized at this moment. Accustomed to hear the open opinions of her father and his friends as to her looks, she had simply and gladly believed herself to be handsome—an hour ago had spoken with assurance of being the prettiest girl at the Morteville ball to-morrow. What did she seem in her own sight now? A wild gipsy child—a picturesque model perhaps, with bright tawny hair, a pair of blue eyes, and not another good feature in her face. Pretty? Why, this girl she was looking at was simply exquisitely faultless. The line of face a delicate oval; a small irreproachable nose; a small irreproachable mouth; hair so fair as to look fair even in a photograph, brought down low and with mathematical accuracy upon

the forehead; a slender throat, gracefully turned aside; soft eyelids, modestly downcast (perhaps because Miss Durant thought it decorous for her eyes to evince no expression in a portrait taken for her cousin, perhaps because the photographer knew that their want of colour would tell if he attempted them upraised); every line exquisitely faultless, in short.

But it was not the beauty of the features alone—not the irreproachable nose and mouth, and Madonna-like downcast eyes; it was the indefinable propriety—I search for and can find no other word—of the whole picture, even to the narrow bit of velvet, from which a black cross depended precisely in the centre of the slender throat, that struck Archie with such a sense of pain. She had herself been photographed by half the artists in Italy, but always in a wild unstudied attitude, with careless drapery, with hair unbound —as "Undine," as "Graziella," as a peasant child, a nymph, a contadina; but ever, as she felt now, with new and bitter shame, as a "model." This was how an English girl of her age and of her birth ought to look in a picture. This was what a man like Gerald Durant meant when he spoke of good, demure, quiet young ladies; and with a stiff, altered manner, that he was not slow to notice, she went back to the window and returned him his locket.

"Your friend is very beautiful, Mr Durant. There is not a fault in her face, and I should stifle if I lived in the same house with her. I thank you for showing me her picture."

"Well, I suppose she *is* beautiful," answered Gerald, refastening the likeness coolly to his chain; "beautiful as a statue, and as cold! I always fancy my cousin Lucia—did I tell you she was my cousin?—must be like Rowena. You have read Ivanhoe?"

Yes, Archie had read Ivanhoe, and Paul and Virginia, and The Newcomes. They found them in some lodgings they had in Padua once; and she remembered all about Rowena very well.

"The same kind of blonde, gentle, negative, unimpeachable woman," went on Gerald, looking away from Archie as he spoke. "Don't you remember feeling how much better poor Ivanhoe must have loved Rebecca in his heart?"

"I remember that Ivanhoe married Rowena," answered Archie laconically. "It didn't matter much to Rebecca, after that, which he loved."

And then there was a silence,—the first silence there had ever been yet between them; broken at length by Miss Lovell trying to say something cold and formal about its being past eleven, and how she had promised Bettina not to stay up late to-night.

"And I shall meet you at the ball to-morrow?" asked Gerald, throwing away the end of his cigar, and moving slightly nearer to his companion.

"The ball! O Mr Durant, will you really be there? I *am* so glad: I thought you were going away to-morrow morning." And her face flushed all over with pleasure, like a child's unexpectedly entranced by the advent of a new toy.

"Perhaps you will not be so glad to-morrow evening," Mr Durant remarked. "I rely upon your giving me a great many dances, Miss Wilson."

"I—give *you* dances? dance with you, do you mean? O, thank you!" Archie's eyes sparkled anew with delight. "Willy Montacute and M. Gounod are the only other dancers I can really depend upon," she added with her usual sincerity; "and I don't want to sit out a single dance. I will dance with you as often as you ask me; and I'll make Bettina go early, so that you won't be able to get engaged before you see me."

And she let her hand rest in his at parting, and leant her head out, smiling, to look after him in the moonlight, and gave him a last salutation, full of meaning and friendliness, as he stopped and looked back at her before turning out of the Rue d'Artois.

"Poor little girl!" thought Gerald magnanimously, when, five minutes later, he was standing smoking his last pipe outside the door of the hotel. "Rouse her jealousy, give her vanity a chance of gratifying itself, and she would be a woman, and as disappointingly easy to win as all other women! As lucky for her as for the duration of my own fancy for her, perhaps, that I am going away so soon."

"Give him dances!" thought Miss Lovell, as she laid her head upon her pillow. "Why, of course I will—every dance on the list if he chooses. I like him. When you see him close, his dress is cleaner than most men's" (Archie had been brought up among foreign artists, remember). "Not too much brains in his head perhaps, but a handsome *malerisch* face,—and just the height

for a partner. I must have those white shoes of old Joubert's now. Mr Durant shall never tell his cousin that he danced with a girl in France who wore black shoes and a white dress at a public ball. Fourteen francs! If the old wretch would only take off one, I've got five francs in my purse already, and perhaps Bettina—" And then Miss Lovell was asleep.

If her vanity was touched, her heart up to the present moment was most entirely unscathed; more unscathed than the Guardsman's, if the truth must be told.

CHAPTER VI.

ROBERT DENNISON'S SECRET.

"MAGGIE HALL! Tell my nephew Gerald that I will no longer allow the mystery about this woman to rest. Tell him, also, that I desire to see him at once, and that this is the last opportunity of explanation he will be likely to have with me."

Maggie Hall. As Robert Dennison walked up and down the breakfast *salle* next morning, waiting for Gerald to appear, and with his uncle's open letter in his hand, the name of Maggie Hall *would* force itself with horrible obstinacy upon his mind. Already he felt that this woman, whom six months ago he had loved with blind unreasonable passion, was a barrier in his path, a blot upon his name, an incubus upon his whole future life: and every time he thought of her thus, an unspoken curse rose in Mr Dennison's heart. Give this message to Gerald; go home, and with well-varnished face assure Gerald's uncle and affianced wife, as he had done before, that he hoped—nay, was sure—they did his cousin wrong,—that matters yet would not turn out so badly as they supposed; keep Gerald, if possible, apart from them still on his return to London,—ay, and how long could all this wretched farce continue to be acted out? Would any woman, would Maggie least of all, with her uneducated mind, her suspicious wilful temper, consent to be kept out of sight, alone, and with a

blackened character for ever? In one of the bursts of passion that had become so frequent of late, might she not any day proclaim to the world how low he, Mr Robert Dennison, had stooped? Low in that he had made her, an ignorant peasant-girl, his wife; doubly, trebly low in that he had not rescued Gerald from the first suspicion of the dishonour (for dishonour he had now begun to think it) that was indeed his own?

Every man, I suppose, who ever did a bad deed has felt, on looking back to that deed, that he drifted into it originally by imperceptible currents; that, however it might have been later, the first beginnings of the evil were wrought by influences beyond and out of himself. Robert Dennison felt this now. He was entangled in a labyrinth of present falsehood. His worldly prospects, his ambition, the things dearest to him in life, were in jeopardy; everything as bad with him as it could be. And why —and how? Because a beautiful peasant-girl had been thrown across his path; because this girl's passionate regard for him had won, first his pity, afterwards his love, and then, in a moment of weakness, but of honour—this he never wearied of reminding himself—he had made her his wife! Could he help it if scandalous country tongues had fastened upon a wrong man with whom to associate this girl's disappearance? Weighted as he was with the horrible reality, was it any very great guilt to allow his cousin to bear, for a few weeks or months, the imputation, only, of the mésalliance? Could he help it if, in the mean time, Gerald's own people should look coldly on him?—if Gerald's prospects should really suffer a little through the imputation? Why, the fellow was sure to be ruined some day. He had been walking straight to ruin ever since he left school, years ago. A scandal more or less about such a man mattered nothing; while an imputation against a white immaculate repute like his, Robert Dennison's, would be death. And if only a few short years could be lived through quietly—if Gerald were once fairly where fools and spendthrifts ought to be—might not he be taken into Sir John's favour, come into Parliament, become his heir in the sight of the world? Nay, with Maggie educated, and the first fresh scandal as to her lowly birth forgotten, might not even this wretched marriage of his be "got over?"

He was deep in the speculation still, his eyes gloomily bent upon the floor as he paced mechanically up and down the room, when Gerald himself, *débonnaire*, merry, careless, the snatch of a French love-song on his lips, sauntered in at the door. And then Mr Dennison, after hastily putting his uncle's letter out of sight, walked straightway up to his cousin's side, and laying his hand heartily on his shoulder, bade him good-day. He had always had a kind of elder-brother manner with Gerald, and this duty that he was going to perform now made it more than ever necessary for him to assume it.

From this point on, the story will, I hope, tell itself, without further need of retrogression; but, for clearness, I should here describe with more detail than I have done the exact worldly position in which these two men—Robert Dennison and Gerald Durant—stood to each other. They were first cousins—Eleanor Dennison, Robert Dennison's mother, having been a Miss Durant, and consequently equally near, as far as blood went, to old Sir John Durant, of Durant's Court, the present head of the family, and the relation to whom both of the young men had been taught to look for their advancement in the world.

Equally near in blood, but, as Robert Dennison in bitterness of spirit was forced to confess, widely remote in their place within the old man's heart. Married to a woman who suited him, rich, the possessor of health and all other prosperity, the death of his only son in infancy had been the one bitter drop in Sir John Durant's cup. He had not felt the loss at the time more than other men feel such bereavements; but every future year as it passed by, leaving him without prospect of another heir, made him feel how wide a blank that little baby's death had, indeed, left in his life! At length, twelve years later, another child was born to him; and in his intense joy at the sight of the little face —come, as he said, to gladden his old age—the unwelcome fact that this second child was only a girl was almost forgotten. His favourite brother had in those intervening years married and died, leaving a motherless boy, who at the time of Lucia's birth was five years of age, the inmate of Sir John Durant's childless house, and as near his heart as anything not actually belonging to himself could be. This boy was Gerald; and long before Lucia could

walk alone, her father had finally made up his mind as to the fitness of marrying her to her cousin.

"Failing this boy, I will make Robert my heir," he would say to his wife, and ignoring the possibility of his daughter's, not of the boy's, death. "Yes; Robert should take the name of Durant, of course, and we would marry her to him. Any way, my children's children shall bear the name of Durant, although Heaven has willed that our own son should be taken from us."

Instead of failing, Gerald grew up strong and hearty; and Lucia Durant, a poor, delicate, over-physicked little girl, struggled up also to maturity. It was just as settled a thing about their marriage still as it had been when one was two years of age and the other seven. Not a word of love had certainly ever passed between them. In the first place, probably, because they did not love each other; and in the second, because Lucia's mother was not a woman to countenance love-making, however legitimate, within her walls.

"I never thought of such a thing until after I married your father," was what Lady Durant would say to her daughter. "Demonstrations of feeling during engagement are, in my opinion, perfectly unnecessary. Any well-feeling woman must grow to like her husband after marriage."

And Lucia was quite of a nature to receive her mother's opinions on the subject of love as final. She was to be Gerald's wife when she was twenty-one; Gerald was nicer than Robert; and she was quite content that her papa had decided upon him. She was glad when Gerald was at the Court, but not broken-hearted in his absence; and this was about as much feeling as Miss Durant had hitherto entertained in the matter.

By hitherto I mean until within six months of the present time. Then occurred the disappearance of Maggie Hall, one of the dairy servants at the home farm of Durant Court; and Gerald Durant, vaguely at first, but gradually with more and more frequency, was named about the county as having in some way been cognisant of her flight. The very suspicion was a horrible blow to the quiet family at the Court. Old Sir John had looked with leniency upon all Gerald's shortcomings heretofore, seldom speaking of them even to his wife, and when he was forced to do so,

using euphemisms which of necessity disarmed Lady Durant's indignation against her scapegrace nephew—no difficult matter, if truth must be told; for, in spite of all her skin-deep prudery, of all her theological orthodoxy, Lady Durant was a very woman in matters of affection, and held the prodigal son in her heart dearer immeasurably than Robert Dennison, with all his prudence and all his virtue. But here was no young man's wildness, no thoughtless extravagance, no evil that a few hundreds or thousands of pounds could, as in all former instances, set right. If Gerald had done this thing that was imputed to him, the old man felt that now, indeed, were his gray hairs to be brought with sorrow to the grave. And bitter and hard words did he use as he enjoined his daughter to hold no communication, save as a friend, with her cousin; to banish from her breast the recollection that he had ever been her lover, until such time as he chose to prove his innocence before the world.

And then Lucia Durant first began to feel, in spite of all the excellent education of nearly twenty-one years, that her heart did throb with some feelings of natural indecorous regard towards the man they had destined her to spend her life with. There was no passion, little outward energy in the girl's temperament; but she possessed the quiet sort of obstinacy not unfrequent in very gentle, very seemingly submissive women; and in those dull winter days, when the blow first fell, and while the old people mourned aloud, Lucia Durant used to sit, her eyes calmly bent over her embroidery, steadfastly resolving that now her cousin Gerald had fallen into ill repute she would hold by him till death. She never really believed him to have played any part in Maggie's disappearance; but, whatever she had believed, I fancy she would still have pleaded for him with her father. Her world of men consisted solely of Robert Dennison and Gerald. One of these two she knew was to be master of herself and of her money. And in the deep-rooted, stifling repugnance that Robert's superhuman virtues had ever inspired her with, she almost felt as though she could have forgiven any earthly sin in the prodigal Gerald. Children brought up on admirable but artificial systems, as Lucia Durant had been, not unfrequently break out into this kind of instinctive rebellion when the time for action comes.

"And why don't we suspect Robert?" the poor child had once mustered courage to say, when her father had been summing up, fearfully hard, against his absent nephew. "Robert was a great deal more attentive to Maggie Hall than Gerald. Robert went abroad too at that time. Robert can only give his word, as Gerald does, to prove his innocence."

"But Robert is not a man to commit such an action," answered her father testily. He would have given half he possessed to know at that moment that Maggie Hall was Robert's wife. "Robert may not have the soft manners that please foolish girls like you, Lucia. He does not read Tennyson in a murmuring voice, and quote Burke about the days of chivalry, and spend his life holding silk for young ladies to wind. But he is a plain upright man of honour; he is more, he is a man of the world, and possesses the ambition that makes a man true to himself and to his family. Robert Dennison throw away his prospects for the sake of a dairy-girl's pretty face!" the old man had added, in a tone which expressed tolerably clearly what sort of affection he had for the plain upright man of honour who would risk neither his own prospects nor the fair name of his family.

And Lucia was dutifully silent; and, two days later, sent Gerald the photograph of herself that he now wore—and showed to other young ladies when requested—upon his watch-chain.

"If she had loved me, she had certainly been less just," he remarked lightly to Robert Dennison. "The most convincing proof you can possibly have of a woman's indifference is, when she behaves to you with generosity." The two young men were seated together at breakfast now; and Robert Dennison with little difficulty had brought the subject round to Gerald's difficulties with the family at the Court. "Imagine any girl really loving a man—do the scoundrels pretend to say this is Lafitte?—really loving a man, and yet listening to reason, where another woman is in the case! Not that I am sorry. Poor little Lucia! the best thing for her, and for me too, is that she should not care for me overmuch."

"But you still adhere to the old idea of making her your wife?" asked Dennison, with a quick scrutiny of his cousin's careless face.

"Adhere to the old idea! Why, what are you talking of, Robert? Of course I adhere to it. How can I do anything but marry Lucia? Three thousand a-year (and Lucia herself, poor child!) will be pleasant adjuncts to the old place and the old name; neither of which could Mr Gerald Durant keep up for one week, if he came into them without any other help than his own resources."

"And you don't look upon Sir John's present temper as of consequence, then?" said Robert Dennison. "You feel quite as sure of his consent to the marriage now as you did a year ago, before all this took place?"

"Quite," answered Gerald calmly. "If the old man had taken umbrage at any of the manifold sins of my youth, I might feel differently; but I don't even trouble myself to think of a sin I have not committed. Heroines never finally disappear, except through trap-doors at the Adelphi, now-a-days. I am as certain of Maggie Hall turning up and acquitting me with her own lips as I am of eating this piece of really excellent pie now." And as he spoke, Gerald conveyed a goodly portion of the *pâté de foie gras* in question into his mouth.

"I'm glad you take it all so quietly," remarked Dennison, with an uncomfortable smile. Was that last remark with respect to Maggie Hall a likely one to make him comfortable? "But still I must tell you, that if you were less indifferent in the matter, I think it might be better for you hereafter. I am an older man than you, Gerald; and this I will say, I think appearances are deucedly against you with regard to Maggie Hall."

Gerald laid down his knife and fork, and the blood rose up angrily into his fair thin-skinned temples. "Very well, Robert. You said something like this to me on the pier last night, and now I'll tell you what I think. I think appearances are deucedly against *you* with regard to Maggie Hall."

Robert Dennison laughed genially. Once brought into the territory of bold falsehood, and this man felt himself more at home than in the delicate border-ground that separates falsehood from truth.

"Appearances against me! Well, I like that. I certainly never expected to hear myself accused of a folly of this kind.

Without pretending to transcendental virtue, eloping with a milkmaid is decidedly not one of the pleasant vices into which I should be likely to fall."

"No, I don't think it is, under any ordinary circumstances," answered Gerald laconically. "It is, I confess, one of the last things I should have accused you of; but unfortunately facts are stubborner things than theories. You said appearances were deucedly against me with regard to Maggie Hall, and I answered that I thought they were deucedly against you. I think so still, Robert; indeed, if we are going to speak the truth to each other, I may as well tell you I thought so from the first. You know as well as I do that I never admired Maggie except as a man must admire every pretty woman, empress or milkmaid, that he comes across; and I know as well as you do that you admired her very differently. Admired! come, I may as well say the word out—that you were as head-over-ears in love with Maggie Hall as she was with you. I can say nothing stronger."

"Gerald, really—"

"Now, my dear fellow," cried Gerald, resuming his knife and fork, and his anger vanishing, as all his emotions had a trick of doing, in a moment, "don't let us spoil our breakfast by entering into any absurd discussion on the subject. You were in love with this young woman, and probably know pretty well where she is at this moment. I was not in love with her, and do not know where she is. *Voilà!* There is no more merit on one side than on the other. The whole thing resolves itself into a simple question of taste. Only don't let us go through the trouble of any useless mystifications when we are without an audience, as now."

"I think, when you talk in this airy way, you forget one slightly important point of which I spoke just now," remarked Robert Dennison; but he kept his eyes on his plate as he said this. "Maggie Hall is reported to be married. Even with your catholic ideas in all things, you must allow that to be accused of having married her is serious."

"Serious to him whom it concerns," answered Gerald, "but to me of most supreme unimportance. Maggie Hall is certain to turn up again; if she is married, as report says, so much the

better for the man who has the happiness of possessing her. Any way, I shall be clear. "It's no use arguing with me,"—he went on, as Robert Dennison was about to speak,—"I'm just as great a fatalist as ever, and just as much convinced of the utter folly of attempting to hinder or forward any event of one's life. If I am to marry Lucia, I shall marry her. If I am to be disinherited, I shall be disinherited. The gods alone know which would be the happiest lot, but I can look forward equally cheerfully to either."

And having now finished an admirable breakfast, Gerald Durant took out his cigar-case, and, retiring to an American lounging-chair beside the open window, prepared for his morning's smoke. "Don't tell Lucia that I stopped to dance with a little girl at a Morteville ball," he remarked, when the first few puffs of his regalia had borne away his thoughts again to Archie. "Great as my faith in Lucia is, I think that is a trial to which no woman's constancy, no woman's long-suffering, should be exposed."

Robert Dennison was still lingering over the breakfast-table—it was one of his "principles" never to smoke in the forenoon—and at this moment had taken out, unremarked by Gerald, and was reading again his uncle's letter.

"Tell Gerald that I will no longer allow the mystery about this woman to rest. Tell him also that I desire to see him at once, and that this is the last opportunity of explanation he will be likely to have with me."

Should he deliver that message of his uncle's in its strict integrity? Mr Dennison pondered. Honour bade him deliver it, certainly. When he saw the old man next he would have to pledge his word that he had done so. But was it matter of certainty that it was politic to himself to play thus with the cards upon the table? He had hinted at the substance of his message, and Gerald had scoffed, in his usual fatalistic way, at its importance. Was there really need to do more? If Gerald heard the message itself, ten chances to one that, roused by its tone, he would obey Sir John's wishes on the spur of the moment; and once face to face, in the present temper of both, Dennison knew enough of human nature to be sure that Gerald and Sir John Durant would be likely to come fatally near the truth in their suspicions. As his cousin seemed so happy running after this last

fancy of his in Morteville, why hurry him away against his will? He confessed that he held it folly for any man to attempt to hinder or forward a single event of his life. Well, let him have the benefit of his own creed, and chase after butterflies when every serious interest of his life was trembling in the balance. He, Robert Dennison, had done his duty in hinting to him that he ought to be in England. Did Sir John actually bind him to show the message in black and white? and might not the delay even of a few more days possibly bring some good turn to himself, if in the mean time the guilt only remained safely lodged upon the shoulders where it already lay?

At this point of his meditation Robert Dennison returned the letter to his pocket, rose from the table, and came up to his cousin's side. "What were you saying about dancing at a ball, Gerald? You don't mean to say, with the thermometer at eighty, that you are really going to a Morteville ball to-night?"

"I mean not only to go, but to dance like a student at Mabille."

"With the little girl you ran after in the moonlight last night?"

"With the little girl I ran after in the moonlight last night."

"Her name is—"

"Her name is Wilson, Robert. Are you arranging in your mind how to break these dreadful tidings to Lucia?"

"I was envying you your delightful freshness of heart, Gerald. After eight—nine years—whatever it is—of such a life as yours, to find zest still in pretty little flirtations with good young ladies of seventeen!"

"I don't marry them, whatever else I do," said Gerald lightly, but looking up full and suddenly into his cousin's face. "Robert, I've been thinking as well as you during the last five minutes, and I'll tell you the conclusion I've come to."

"About—about what?" cried Dennison, with an affectation of indifference—"about the cut of your next coat, or whether you will wear white gloves or lavender at the Morteville ball to-night?"

"No; about neither, my friend. I have been thinking about Maggie Hall; and that it would be a vast deal better for all of us, for me in particular, that the truth should be spoken at once. Maggie is your wife."

Mr Dennison's dark face changed colour by the faintest shade;

but neither his eyes nor mouth betrayed token of emotion or surprise.

"We spoke of this just now, Gerald, and finished with the subject, I thought. Don't re-open it, if you please."

And he took out his watch, and added something about the punctual starting of the steamer.

"The steamer goes at eleven," said Gerald. "You have half-an-hour still, and what I have to say won't take five minutes. Maggie is your wife, Robert. She wrote to me, a week after your marriage, and told me all."

"She—she never dared do it!" cried Dennison. "Show me the letter—she never dared write to you, and make such a statement," he added quickly.

"I cannot only show it you, but give it you," said Gerald quietly. "God knows I don't want to be in possession of it, or any other evidence of your secret. As to daring," he added, "I think she acted pretty much as most women would have done. You were taken suddenly ill in Paris, you may recollect; and knowing me better, or being less afraid of me than the rest of us, she wrote this letter. What would you have her do, Robert? Write and say that she was with you, but not your wife? Spartan generosity that; not to be expected from any woman in the present age of the world."

"And you obeyed the summons?" asked Dennison; but more to gain time than because he cared to hear the question answered.

"No. Before I had time to start I got another note—you shall have them both—telling me that you were better, and imploring me never to tell you—poor child!—that she had written. Here they are, Robert; and I can tell you I shall feel a great deal more comfortable when I have got rid of them, and of the secret too. Keeping things dark is not, and never has been, a forte of mine."

And taking a porte-monnaie from his breast-pocket, Gerald opened it, and took out two little notes, which he handed over to his cousin.

Yes: they were hers. No mistake about that cramped, uneducated hand—those complicated, ill-worded sentences. And the first of them was signed, large and distinct, "Margaret Dennison." It was the first time Robert had ever read that name—for in

writing to himself she knew too well to sign it in full—and a flush of mingled anger and shame rose up over his dark face.

"Now, mind, I don't want to know anything more than you choose to tell in the matter," cried Gerald. "The only thing I care about is, that I shouldn't be incriminated too deep; and perhaps the time has come when something ought to be said. You're the man to say it, Robert. You must set me right—but in any way you like—with Sir John and the rest of them."

"And—and you've never said a word about it before, then?" exclaimed Dennison, stung horribly by this generosity from a man whose frivolous nature he had always, both to himself and to others, pretended to despise.

"Can you ask me? Of course I have not. Of course you are the first and only person to whom I should think of opening my lips about it. I was awfully sorry, Robert—awfully sorry; I don't mind confessing it; for, after all, birth——however, there's no good talking now. And when first I heard that I was accused in the matter, I thought it might be all for the best to remain quiescent for a time—I mean until Sir John had at least accustomed himself to the idea of one of his nephews being Miss Hall's husband. It really isn't the same thing after all," he added, ignorant how cruel a blow his words inflicted upon Dennison; "I mean as you were never meant to marry Lucia, or anything, there is not half such a weight of guilt on your shoulders as there would have been on mine; indeed, I don't see what Sir John Durant or any other man has got to say at all on the subject of your marriage."

"Assuming the marriage to be a fact," said Dennison quietly; but taking very good care to put the letters safely into his pocket as he spoke.

"Assuming the marriage to be a fact!" repeated Gerald with emphasis. "You don't mean to tell me I am wrong in that assumption?"

"I mean to thank *you* heartily for the way you have acted," was Robert Dennison's answer. "Whether Miss Hall's statement had truth in it or not," he half laughed, "is a question that the future will decide. You believed it; and you have behaved like the good generous fellow you always were, Gerald, and I shall never forget it, come what may. For the rest, rely on my doing

all that ought to be done—all that perhaps I ought to have done long ago—as far as you are concerned. You will not bear me any ill-will for having tacitly joined in your condemnation hitherto?"

"Ill-will, Robert? Not I. I only know that you or any man must have been deucedly hard-placed before taking the trouble of trying to keep the thing secret at all."

"And if—if I find that the only way to turn Sir John's suspicions away from you is to compromise the girl herself, I may leave the matter as it is for a few days more, then?—till you return, at all events! You can understand, my dear Gerald, that—without for a moment admitting the truth of what these letters state—I may be in a position in which a single hasty step might do me an incalculable injury.

"I think, as I said before, Robert, that you are in a position where plain-speaking would be the best for us all," answered Gerald. "But on one point you may feel thoroughly at your ease: I give you my honour to say no word of all this to Sir John, under whatever circumstances I may find myself, until you choose that it shall be known."

And then, considerably to the relief of both, a servant came in with Monsieur's bill, and to announce that time was up; and a few minutes later the cousins had shaken hands and parted. Robert Dennison's grasp was more affectionately tight than usual as he said good-bye; but his hand was as cold as death; his voice had not its usual sound as he expressed some commonplace hope that Gerald might still return in time for his dinner-party to-morrow.

A month later Gerald Durant looked back to this parting, and remembered bitterly the cold touch and altered voice; remembered too the set expression of Robert's face when, a minute or two afterwards, he had watched him drive away from the hotel.

A month later! What he did now was to congratulate himself heartily on being no longer bored by the possession of other people's secrets. Robert was a scheming long-headed fellow, always worrying himself with some mystification or other for social ends, which to Gerald seemed simply valueless when attained. Possibly he was married to Maggie Hall; possibly not. Whichever way it was, there were evidently tedious schemes afoot for keeping everything dark, and telling one set of people one thing and one another;

and he himself had made an excellent escape by giving up his secret, and so washing his hands of all further trouble or responsibility.

Si vous croyez que je vais dire
Qui j'ose aimer,
Je ne saurais, pour un empire,
Vous la nommer."

There was a piano in the room; and the sweet vibrating melody of Fortunio's song having suddenly come into his head, Gerald went over to the instrument, struck a chord or two, and on the spot forgot Margaret Hall and Robert Dennison, and everything in the world belonging to them. He had an exquisitely musical voice; and when he finished the little ballad his handsome delicate features were all a-glow under the influence of that imaginary love of which he had been singing. Then he lit another cigar, threw himself upon a sofa, and read the beginning and end of a new novel; then went back to the piano, and whistled through a couple of sets of waltzes of his own composition, accompanying himself charmingly by ear, as his way was, without seeming to know what he was playing; finally remembered it was eleven o'clock, jumped up, seized his hat, and ran out just in time to meet Miss Wilson coming back from her morning's walk on the sands.

He was over head and ears in debt; was at variance with the relation to whom he owed everything and looked for everything,—on the eve, for aught he knew, of ruin of all kinds; and he had just played the strongest card he possessed into the hands of an unscrupulous adversary. And a little French song could send the tears into his eyes, and a novel amuse him, and looking into a pretty face make his pulse beat as pleasantly as if no such thing as death or falsehood or treachery existed in the world.

Are such natures to be called wicked or weak, or only philosophical? While Rome burnt, Nero distracted his thoughts with his violin. Perhaps when his turn for rehabilitation comes we shall be taught to see how blithe and gentle and *débonnaire* poor Nero really was, and make a hero of him.

CHAPTER VII.

THE LODGING IN CECIL STREET.

At the window of a dingy lodging-house in one of the smaller streets leading from the Strand to the River a girl stood eagerly awaiting Robert Dennison on the day of his return from France. This girl was his wife. She was a strikingly beautiful woman, with great velvet-brown eyes, a colourless skin, but fine of texture and pure as marble; jet-black hair, a throat upright and modelled like a statue's, and lips and teeth that alone would have made any woman lovely. Her figure, moulded on a large scale, and possibly promising over-stoutness for the future, was perfect at present in its full, free, youthful symmetry; and her hands—well, many a duchess has not really small and well-formed hands; and time and cessation from work, and much wearing of gloves, might yet bring poor Maggie's up to respectable mediocrity. Looking at her altogether as she was now—yes, even after she spoke; and you could detect the north-country burr upon her fresh well-pitched voice—she was a woman whose hand, with all its look of labour, a man might well take without shame and lead forward to the world as his wife. Beauty, youth, health, so perfect as in itself to be a loveliness, and as loyal a heart as ever beat within a woman's breast,—these made up Maggie's dower. And Robert Dennison put them in the balance against her one default of lowly birth, and cursed the hour in which he committed the exceeding, the irreparable mistake of having made her his wife.

She was dressed in a clear white dress, as he liked best to see her; with plain bands of black velvet round her throat and wrists; her hair drawn straight from her broad forehead, and gathered in one large knot low on the neck; a little bunch of country-flowers, the first extravagance she had committed during her husband's absence, in her breast. Never had she looked more fair, more remote from vulgarity; never had she thrown her arms around his neck with more delighted love than when, after hours of patient watching for him, Mr Dennison at length arrived.

"Robert! ah, Robert! I've been so lonely without you; and

you've never written to me, except that one line yesterday, for a week! What have you been doing all this time away?" with the slight half-querulous tremour in her voice that when a man still loves a woman he thinks so charming, and when he has ceased to love her, so intensely boring.

"Well, I've been doing a good many things," answered Mr Dennison, suffering her for a moment to pull his face down to her level and cover it with kisses; then breaking away and throwing himself into the only comfortable chair the room possessed,—a chair purchased expressly, in fact, for Mr Dennison's comfort,—"spending a few days with a friend of yours, Mrs Dennison, for one."

"A friend of mine, Robert?" She was too excited by his coming to notice the fearfully bad omen of his calling her "Mrs Dennison." "La, now, who could that have been? Some one from home?"—the blood rushing up into her face at the thought.

"O yes, some one from home, in one sense; however, we'll speak of that by and by. How have you been spending your time while I was away?" He scrutinized her closely. "You have taken to a very swell style of dress in my absence, at all events."

"Swell? Me swell in my dress! Why, it's only one of my old grenadines done up and trimmed afresh. I have not had a single new dress this summer, and I'm wearing my black-velvet hat still, Sundays and all, Robert."

"What a dreadful hardship! No wonder you wanted me to return. Why don't you ask me, as you're longing to do, Maggie, whether I have brought you a new bonnet, or what I have brought you from Paris?"

Before answering, she came close to him, knelt herself on a stool at his feet, and leant her cheek fondly against his knee as she looked up in his face. Instinct told her now that her husband was in one of his bad days; and, like a dog who reads punishment in his master's eyes, she sought by caresses to turn aside the hand in whose power it lay to smite her.

"Much I think of bonnets and fine clothes when you're not here, my darling. If you had seen how I've been the last fortnight, you wouldn't have said my head was running on the like of them."

"Ah! And on 'the like' of what has your head been running, may I inquire?"

"On you, Robert, you,—and nothing else,—and wishing you back, and longing for the time when you'll not have to go away from me any more. O, my dear," she broke out passionately, and catching one of his hands tight up against her heart, "if you knew how I hated this life I have to lead! Moving from lodging to lodging, as if I'd done some shame I didn't want to have tracked; and never speaking to a soul from week's end to week's end, and knowing what the people at home must think of me; and all when I ought to be at your side, Robert, and known to your friends as your wife. I believe another month or two like this would drive me mad—indeed I do. I *can't* bear it."

In the early rose-coloured time of their marriage, Dennison had hired a pretty little furnished house in St John's Wood for poor Maggie. Then, as his love cooled, he began to remember expense, and moved her into a lodging at Kensington; then Mr Dennison fancying, or saying he fancied, that some one had seen and recognized her at the window, into a smaller lodging; and so on—love cooling more and more—until she lived now in two rooms on the second floor of one of the meanest houses in Cecil Street, Strand.

"If you don't like London lodgings, you should do as I've often wanted you—go into the country. It can't be any particular pleasure to me, you know, to see you in such a place as this."

Something in his tone—something in the dead feel of the hand she cherished within her own—roused all the poor girl's miserable, never-dying suspicions in a moment.

"There now!" she cried. "A minute ago I longed for your coming more than I longed for you when you were my lover, Robert; and now I swear to God I only wish I was lying dead at your feet! It's no pleasure for you to see me here! It will never be any pleasure to you to see me anywhere; for you're tired of me; I know it all. I'm not a fine lady, with fine feelings like yours; but I know how a man, if he was a prince, ought to treat his wife, and you don't treat me so. Why, here you've been back all this time" (five minutes it was really), "and you've not kissed me of your own will; you've not looked at me, hardly, yet. O

Robert, Robert, love me again! I didn't mean to complain; I only want you to love me better and come and see me more."

And then she burst into tears; not silent pearly tears, just staining her cheek, as you may read of some Lady Gwendoline in her silken boudoir, but good, honest, demonstrative tears, such as these uneducated women do shed when the passions of their kind call aloud for utterance.

"O Lord!" groaned Dennison, taking his hand away from her, and putting it tight over his eyes—"scenes and tears—scenes and tears—before I have been here ten minutes, as usual!"

"You used to be so kind and good to me always when you came," she sobbed.

"And you used to be so cheerful and good-tempered," retorted Dennison; "not always crying and making these everlasting complaints as you do now. There's no good going on any longer with it at all. This kind of thing has been acted out millions of times by other men and women before us, and always with the same results. Why should we be an exception? Mad passion for six weeks, cooling passion for a fortnight, general weariness on both sides, a little neglect on one, a great many reproaches on the other. There you have the story of the master-madness of most human beings' lives."

Then Maggie rose from her place at her husband's feet, and struggled hard to keep her tears back from her eyes. "Robert," she remarked, tolerably calmly, "it seems to me that talk like this might suit very well where a man had the power to get out of 'this kind of thing;' and a girl would be a sorry fool indeed who would want to stay with him if she was free to go. But I am not free, you know; I am your wife. You seem to forget that a little, when you run on about being tired of me."

"No, by Heaven, I don't forget it!" cried Dennison, with rising passion; "I don't forget it at all; and you've taken pretty good care other people sha'n't be in a position to do so. My cousin, Mr Gerald Durant, has told me all: how you sold me—betrayed me to my family in the first fortnight of my marriage. Not very likely that I should come here and be moved by your soft words and your deceitful kisses, when I had just been hearing such a sweet story as that."

She blenched to the colour of ashes. Her limbs seemed to tremble under her weight. "I—I never meant to do you a harm, Robert. You were ill; and I didn't know who to go to in my fright, and so I wrote to Mr Gerald, and—"

But she stopped, sick with terror, at the new expression that she read upon her husband's face. His black eyes were fixed upon her full; the red light, that could at times illumine them, giving them a meaning such as they had never expressed to her before; his lips were set into what by courtesy may be termed a smile; and while he watched her he was keeping time gently upon the arm of the chair with the white jewelled fingers of his right hand. A sickening, a physical fear overcame her. She read she knew not what resolve upon that iron face; and felt about as much power in herself to resist him as a dove might feel with the kite's talons already pressing upon her heart.

"It's my only offence against you," she stammered at length; the first, and I swear to you the last."

"Of course," said Dennison, with quiet meaning; "every offence a woman like you commits is the last, until a new temptation comes. I'm quite aware of that, and also of how great a reliance can be played upon your oath, Maggie. Still, to prevent anything so disagreeable happening again, I've been thinking over a fresh plan with regard to your future life. Before I married you, I remember you saying you had a fancy to go to America—"

"Robert!"

"Hear me out, please; and do try not to get up any more scenes." But he shifted away from the gaze of the large horror-struck eyes that were staring miserably at him from that white face. "I am not going to poison you, or shut you up in a mad-house; so you needn't go in for any of the tears and shrieks of your favourite penny-Herald heroines. What I am going to propose will be for your happiness and mine. I know of some excellent people just going out to Canada, and willing to take you with them, for a couple of years or so. You would lead a cheerful country life, instead of being moped up here in London lodgings; you should hear from me constantly; you should never have a hand's turn of work to do unless you chose it; and—"

"I will not go."

"Ah! I *wish* you would have the civility to hear me patiently till I have finished."

"I will not go. Why should I stand here and listen to more of your insults?"

He shrugged his shoulders quietly.

"When you take to that sort of language you, of course, have the advantage of me, Maggie. Still, it would be better, for your own sake, perhaps, if you would keep yourself a little more composed."

"I'm quite composed enough to know what you want, and what I mean to do."

"And that is—? I should really like to hear what your views for the future are."

"Well, they vary, Robert, they vary. Sometimes, when the blackest times are on me, you know, I think I'll just walk away to the river and throw myself in, and be at rest."

"Indeed! That resolution, I am quite sure, passes away very quickly. *Après?* I beg your pardon—what next?"

"Well, next, when I think how it would please you to be rid of me, and how then you would be able to work free, as you'd like to, at getting Mr Gerald out of his uncle's favour" (for a moment Mr Dennison's fingers did not keep perfect time to that imaginary air he was playing), "then, I say, I think of quite a different way to act. You want to hear?"

He nodded assent, the red glow becoming more visible in his eyes.

"Then I think I'll just go straight down to the Court, and take my marriage-lines out and show them, and ask them to be my friends. The ladies would, I'll answer for it; for they are too real ladies to feel that I shamed them, as common rich people would. And so would Sir John, in time. He doesn't love you enough to take your marriage to heart as he might have done if it had been Mr Gerald."

If Maggie had known the world for fifty, instead of for one-and-twenty years, she could not have struck home with surer aim to the hard worldly heart of Robert Dennison than her simple peasant instincts had enabled her to do. Every word told. Her knowledge of his designs, scarcely whispered to his own conscience,

against Gerald; the term "common rich people" (Dennison's father had been a manufacturer); last, and sharpest, the bitter truth that Sir John would, with very little pain, get over *his* mésalliance —all stung him more acutely than any reproaches, however unjust, however passionate, of his wife's had ever done before.

"You had better have a care before you speak to me like this," he exclaimed under his breath, as he always spoke when he was really moved. "For your coarse suspicions of myself I don't care, except in as far as they remind me of my degradation in being married to a woman who could even admit them to her mind. For the rest, Maggie, take my advice; don't you go to Durant's Court without me."

"I may do that, and worse, if you say anything about sending me off to America again," she answered sullenly, but with a piteous quiver of the lips.

"May I inquire what you mean by 'and worse'? It would be a pity for us in the least to misunderstand each other."

"I mean that I may just walk straight to your chambers any day, and demand to stay there;—you hear, Robert,—*demand* to stay there. I mean that I may go to a lawyer, and tell him all my case, and see whether I haven't a right to live under your roof. Now you know all."

He watched her slowly and calmly while she said this; then he remarked, without any further sign of passion in his voice, "Yes; now I know all. I felt long ago that I had been an idiot for marrying a peasant woman with a handsome face like yours; but I credited you—on my soul I did, Maggie!—with loving me at least. Now I see you as you are,—the worst kind of woman, I believe, that lives. You acted virtue to make me marry you; you acted love as long as you thought love would pay. Now that you find yourself in poor lodgings, and with bonnets running short, you come out in your true colours; threaten me to go to law sooner than be robbed of a shilling that you think your own. As you rightly remark, now I know all."

She was an ignorant peasant woman; he was quite correct there. But in her peasant heart were truth and justice, and in her peasant brain was sharp, honest common-sense. And his injustice was too transparent to wound her.

"You say all that, but you don't mean it, Robert. My virtue, as you call it, was not play-acting—as I'm your wife, I wonder you like to think so;—and my love wasn't; and it is not money I want now. I want justice, and I'll have it."

"O, you will?"

"Yes, I will! if not from you, from others. I swear that."

"Very well. Now listen to me, and to something else I'm going to swear." He got up and stood close to her, looking steadily down into her face. "I am not a weak man, as you know; not at all likely to be turned from anything I once made up my mind to do; and now I will tell you how I'm going to act about you. This proposal of going abroad you may or may not accept—"

"I will not accept it."

"Very well; then you will live elsewhere. That is a matter about which I can merely offer an opinion. You can, if you choose, stay here in London, or you can go into the country; and as long as you remain quiet, and act as I tell you to act, I shall come and see you constantly, and try to make your life as little lonely as I can."

The blood rushed to her foolish heart at the first approach to a kind word from his lips. Poor fellow! had she not been too hard upon him a minute ago?

"I'm no blackguard, Maggie; and in spite of your temper and reproaches, I do remember—remember, is it ever away from my mind?—that you are my wife. In a few years, possibly much sooner, I hope to have got on in my profession; very likely, through my uncle's interest, to be in Parliament—you see I tell you everything openly and above-board—and then, having educated yourself in the interval, my poor Maggie, we will acknowledge our marriage before the world. This, mind, is the future *I* look forward to, if you continue to obey me. Now for the other side. If you, directly or indirectly, make known our marriage to my uncle, I swear to you this: from that moment you will be my wife no longer, save in name. You may be acknowledged by my family; you may by law obtain the right of living under my roof—to-morrow, I've no doubt, if you set about it properly—and if you do, I swear—do you hear?—I swear that I will never take your

hand in mine, never look upon you, except as a stranger, again while I live. Now we understand each other thoroughly, I think, and the happiness or the misery of our lives is in your hands." And Mr Dennison took up his hat as if to go.

For a minute she stood irresolute; then she turned, faltered to him, and fell upon his breast.

"I'll say nothing; I'll never go near the Court, or near any of them; I'll never wish to disobey you again, Robert. If I see Mr Gerald, and you tell me to, I'll say that it was a falsehood I wrote about my marriage. Only never look at me as you did then. Never think the thought even of giving me up. O Robert, I'd bear any shame with you sooner than to be called your wife before men, and that you should look at me again as you did then!"

He had hit upon the right way of managing her at last. Robert Dennison felt that, and prided himself on his skill in diagnosis, as he sat, with limbs outstretched, comfortably smoking in a coupé of the express train some hours later, on his road to Staffordshire. The question was now, how to utilize his slave's new subjugation to the uttermost? Was it quite impossible that, instead of hindering, she might be brought to lend herself to the furtherance of his ambition? One thing was certain; the letters she had written Gerald Durant lay in his, Robert Dennison's, desk. With his wife working for, not against him, what was to prove the marriage, even if Gerald, not a likely occurrence, should betray him to his uncle?

It was a soft summer evening, the first evening in August; and as the train bore Robert Dennison through the rich harvest-tinted fields, he was sensible of great enjoyment in the delicious country air, the golden landscape, the excellent flavour of his first-rate havannah. No man of his stamp seems bad to himself while his plans look prosperous. Remorse, or what stands to such men for remorse, sets in with the first dark days of threatening discovery; and no discovery at all seemed impending now. Maggie had been suddenly brought, by a little kind harshness, to a proper state of mind. Gerald Durant, in a fit of Quixotic generosity, had made over the game, for the present at least, into his own hands. What was there in either of these circumstances to disturb Mr Robert Dennison's conscience?

He enjoyed the fair evening landscape, the country air, the motion even of the train, with a keener relish than he had enjoyed anything for months; and his dark face looked handsomer than usual, so genial and well-pleased was the expression it wore, when, just in time to obey the first dressing-bell, he arrived at Durant's Court.

CHAPTER VIII.

"NOBLESSE OBLIGE."

"WELL, and what of Gerald?" asked Sir John Durant, when at length a somewhat silent dinner was finished, and Lady Durant and Lucia had left the uncle and nephew alone over their wine. "You found him out and gave him my message, as I desired, Robert?"

"Yes, sir. I gave him your message," answered Dennison. "Indeed, I returned from Paris by Morteville instead of Havre, to do so."

"Morteville! Is Gerald there?"

"He has been there for the last week or more, I believe."

"Doing what, pray?

"Well, sir—" and Mr Dennison had the grace to hesitate.

"Robert," cried the old man, "I desire that you will speak the honest truth to me. The time has past for you, or for any of us, to show any consideration in speaking of Gerald's actions. For Lucia's sake alone, I have a right to put these questions, and to require very plain speaking from you in reply."

"Oh, don't think there's anything wrong going on," said Robert, looking up with sudden animation. "Poor Gerald merely seems to be killing his time as usual. He has been travelling for a month in the Tyrol, I believe, and is now—well, if I must speak plainly, is now losing a good deal of money to some table d'hôte acquaintance at écarté, every evening, and running about during the day-time after the last pretty face that has taken his fancy. Nothing more than that, sir, on my word."

"Oh! And what answer did he give to my message?" It never wanted more than one word of Robert Dennison's dispraise to make the old man secretly warm towards the absent prodigal. "You gave it him exactly in my words, I hope?"

"I did. I had your letter in my hand when I spoke to him."

"Well?"

"Well, sir. I really don't think there are any grounds whatever for supposing Gerald is guilty of what you have suspected him—on my word, I do not. No man can look so happy, as he does, who was entangled in the miserable way you have feared."

"Happy—looks happy, does he? That shows, at least, how much he cares for his alienation from Lucia! Robert, give me his answer, if you please. I want the precise message that Gerald returns to mine."

"He told me that he is innocent, sir," said Dennison, shifting his eyes from his uncle's face as he spoke. "That he knows nothing of Maggie Hall, that he never saw her from the day of her disappearance till this."

"And you believe this, on your honour, to be true, Robert?"

"I do. I see no proof whatever against Gerald, more than against any other man." Mr Dennison helped himself to a bunch of grapes, carefully selecting the muscatel, of which he was particularly fond, from the black Hamburg. "I see no positive proof against Gerald, and I don't know why we should disbelieve his word."

"And why has he taken no pains to come forward to prove this to me? You are a lawyer, Robert. Is it not commonly thought in law that, if a man makes no attempt to prove his innocence, it is tolerably strong presumptive evidence of his guilt?"

"Certainly," answered Dennison; "and there could be very little doubt as to the justice of the presumption, with regard to any ordinary man. But Gerald, in some things, is not at all an ordinary man. He is indolent by temperament, and is thoroughly and consistently a fatalist. If he is to be cleared, he is without any exertion or trouble of his own; if he is not—"

"If he is not, and soon, too, he will be a beggar!" cried Sir John Durant, angrily. "If Gerald, with a suspicion like this hanging over him, chooses to philander away his time with worth-

less men and women at Morteville, as all his life before has been spent, he may do so; but when he wearies of them he shall not find Lucia's hand ready for his reward! Of that I have quite made up my mind. That he has married this wretched girl I do not, in my heart, believe. No, Robert, I do not. With all his faults, Gerald is not a boy to bring such shame as that upon us. Whether he had any share in her flight, I decline even to think. What I have to do with is this, that he has been accused—he, my daughter's promised husband—of having made a shameful marriage, and that he has allowed near upon seven months to pass without coming here openly, and telling me all. Yes, all, Robert. Gerald knows what I have been to him, what I could forgive at this moment—ay, till seventy times seven—if he would come honestly forward and acquit himself of so foul a charge."

"And—and if he could not thus acquit himself?" asked Dennison, in a somewhat compressed voice. "As regards Lucia, I need not ask what your feelings must be towards him; but would this marriage, supposing the worst to be true, be sufficient to make you cast the poor fellow off entirely? A lowly alliance is not necessarily a shameful one, sir."

"Indeed. I am sorry to hear such an opinion from you, although I am willing to believe you actuated by good feeling towards Gerald in expressing it. If a nephew of mine, Robert, was to marry Margaret Hall, or any woman in her class, I would from that day banish him from my heart, my house, and, which I dare say he would care much more for, from my will too. No one is more lenient to folly—ay, even to error, in a young man than myself. Dishonour I would never either forget or condone. Our family has not hitherto had blood like Margaret Hall's in its veins."

"The worse for our family," thought Robert, mentally comparing Lucia's sickly prettiness and the magnificent face and form he had parted from four or five hours ago; then aloud: "I suppose you are right, sir," he said. "I suppose a mésalliance is about the worst action, for himself and for others, that a man can commit. However," he went on, "I am glad to find that, like myself, you don't believe Gerald to be so deeply committed. Give him the benefit of the doubt still. Pride, delicacy, a hundred feelings we may not understand" (how unconsciously men utter epigrams about

themselves!) "may prevent him from coming forward to prove anything in such a matter. We don't even know what his relations may really have been with Maggie Hall."

But Robert Dennison had humanity enough in him to feel that these words, this implied calumny against this man and woman who were truest to him in the world, rather choked him in the utterance.

"Robert," answered Sir John, after a minute or two of silence, "I'm in no humour now to talk about Gerald's pride, and Gerald's delicacy. How low has not my pride been sunk during all these months? You are the nearest relation after Gerald that I have. I don't know why, save that he grew up here, I should say 'after' him at all. You are as near to me as he is, and I'm now going to tell you the simple truth about all this. It has been my dream, you know, for that boy to marry Lucia. He must have the title, he must have the old house when I am gone, and it has been the hope of my life that Lucia should share them with him, and that her children should be born here, as my son's children would have been had he lived. Well, I begin to see that my dream has been a foolish one. Not for this one misunderstanding—a misunderstanding that another month, another week, may heal. For this last misunderstanding itself, no; but because this indifference of Gerald shows me in reality what the character of the man is whom I look upon as a son. 'Tis no use glozing it over, Robert. For more than six months now Gerald has known himself to rest under this imputation, yet never has he come forward in an open, manly way either to refute or acknowledge the charge. Married to her, I do not believe he is, but every man and woman in the county believes Gerald Durant, in some way, to have been cognizant of Margaret Hall's flight. And still Gerald Durant is the promised husband of my daughter. It shan't go on any more so; my God, it shan't!" he repeated, passionately. "I wrote him one letter, and he sent me,—well, he sent me what I felt to be a cursed flippant answer, affecting to treat the whole thing as a joke, and even saying—mark this, Robert, even saying that if a member of the family *had* married Maggie, he thought it a disgrace that could be very easily got over. To have sacrificed worldly prospects for the woman one loves would be honour—hear that!

rather than disgrace, with more high-flown rubbish about the girl's goodness and beauty and virtue than I care to think of;" and the old man's face flushed over with passion. "Now, in reply to this last message sent through you, he coolly sends me word that he is innocent. Innocent! when he ought to be here at Lucia's side, here sitting at my table proving his innocence! And you tell me he is losing his money—my money would be nearer the mark—and running after disreputable acquaintances at Morteville. I'll have done with the lad—I'll have done with him!" he exclaimed, now fairly worked up to white heat. "Thank God, he is not my only nephew, Robert. I have you to look to yet to keep our family from utter disgrace and ruin. My poor little Lucia."

In all his life Robert Dennison had never seen Sir John Durant so moved. He was a well-preserved, handsome old man, with grey eyes that once had been soft and passionate, like Gerald's; a fair receding forehead, but beautiful rather than intellectual in its contour; refined patrician features; and with only the fatal hereditary weakness of mouth and chin to mar the face. A hot flush had risen over his cheek; his lips trembled as he spoke. Now, if ever, Robert felt was the time for him to strike; now, with the metal hot, Gerald away, and his own superior virtue and ability in such conspicuous pre-eminence.

"As regards Margaret Hall, I can only repeat I believe Gerald to be innocent. As regards his behaviour to Lucia, I can't trust myself to speak. That is a subject on which Gerald and I have not agreed for a good many years. But there is another point on which I may, without disingenuousness to my cousin, speak openly. I should do so if Gerald were sitting here at table with us. It does grieve me bitterly to see him so utterly indifferent to the public career which, through your interest, sir, he might enter upon, if he chose."

The tone in which he said this was unmistakeably sincere; much more so than the tone in which he had been speaking hitherto. Sir John Durant looked steadfastly at his strong, resolute brow and face, and the thought crossed him that he had hitherto done this other nephew of his injustice. The son of an unloved sister, and of a man whom he secretly despised for his

want of birth, Robert Dennison had never awakened any but the most lukewarm interest in his heart. Every hope, every ambition, the promise of every good thing, had been lavished on Gerald; and now Gerald was a spendthrift and a prodigal, and this other lad was prudent, self-denying, steady; a poor, albeit a rising barrister, living in his frugal Temple chambers, and trusting only to his own industry and his own brain for success.

"It needs but for you to bring him forward," repeated Dennison, after a minute or two, during which he had felt rather than seen his uncle's steadfast scrutiny of his face; "it needs but for you to bring him forward, and Gerald must be returned for L——. I was speaking to Conyers about it only to-day, and he said the contest would be a nominal one. You and Lord Sandford together can bring in any man you choose to propose; and if Gerald. . . But what is the use of talking about it?" he interrupted himself, with unassumed bitterness. "Gerald has no more ambition now than he had when he was eleven, and retired—do you remember, sir?—from competing for a prize he was certain of, because he wished some other boy—his Damon of the minute!—to get it. He never had ambition; he never will have it. Ambition! It is not in his nature to desire anything strongly."

Sir John winced under the remark, then lapsed into silence—the little reminiscence of Gerald's childish folly not, perhaps, affecting his weaker nature quite in the way that it affected Mr Dennison—and, after a few minutes, rose from his chair, and proposed that they should join the ladies in the drawing-room.

"But you are not angry, sir?" cried Dennison, anxiously, as he jumped up, with the deferential promptness he always showed in obeying his uncle's smallest wishes. "You are not annoyed, I hope, at my having alluded to all this?" he repeated in a low tone, as they were on their way to the drawing-room. "You know it's an old ambition of mine to see our family represented in Parliament, and I can't help feeling strongly about it at such a time as this."

"Annoyed with you! No, no," answered Sir John; but he turned from his admirable, high-principled nephew as he spoke, and, looking through the open door of his daughter's morning-room, his eyes fell on a beautiful full-length portrait of the

prodigal; the prodigal at nine years of age, with little Lucia by his side. "I was only wishing he was somewhat more like you, Robert," added the old man with a sigh. "With your ambition and your standing, Gerald might have become anything he chose."

"Say rather, with Gerald's personal qualities I might have become anything I chose, sir," Dennison answered quickly. "Ambition and perseverance are very well, but brilliant natural gifts—a face and a manner like Gerald's—are worth all of them in the race of life. For one man or one woman who likes me, fifty like him. It has been so always, and it is just. I have only to be with him an hour myself to feel the fascination of his presence as much as any one."

The real strength of Robert Dennison's character lay in his capacity for saying things like this. A common, coarse slanderer slanders indiscriminately. Dennison knew not only where to stop from reviling, but where to begin to be generous. And then he possessed the rare gift of seeming to feel what he said! At this moment his voice shook, his face softened, and Sir John Durant felt that he had never cared for his sister's son so much in his life before. "You're a good lad, Robert, and a generous one, and some day I'll prove to the world the high opinion I have of you!" And as he entered the drawing-room, one of his hands rested kindly on his nephew's shoulder.

With a quick, upraised glance from her embroidery, Lucia Durant noticed the unwonted familiarity, and knew that Gerald must be further off than ever from her father's heart.

CHAPTER IX.

LUCIA.

The drawing-room at Durant's Court was a long low room, with mullioned windows, glazed still in the ancient style, with small diamond-formed quarries, a heavily-carved ceiling, panelled walls, and tapestry-covered furniture that had served the Durants during

the last hundred years at least. Surrounded in the county by pottery lords far richer than themselves, pottery lords who converted their houses into amateur bazaars or show-rooms of everything costly and elaborate in modern upholstery, it was Lady Durant's vanity to keep the Court furnished simply as it was when she first came to it a bride, and when none of their rich neighbours had as yet risen above their native clay. No ornament in the hall save its dark groined roof, the shields of arms upon its walls, and one huge suit of tilting-armour—not bought in Wardour Street, but that had been worn by a Durant of old, and had descended from father to son in the family since the time of Elizabeth. In the dining-room plain mahogany furniture, of a fashion to recall the parlour in which Squire Western used to sit and listen to his Sophia's harpsichord. In the bedchambers the faded blue or green or damask hangings, which had given to each its name for generations; and in the drawing-room, as I have said, the same tapestry-covered chairs and couches as had been the mode when George the Third first became king.

"No better furnished than a parsonage," the manufacturers' ladies thought, when by rare chance any of them came to be admitted on a morning visit to Lady Durant. But then what a strange, what a potent atmosphere of home seemed, by virtue of its very plainness, to hang over all the silent, grave old house! The manufacturers' wives were sensible of *that*, and for the life of them could not make out why the crimson-and-gold stained windows, the cast-iron balustrades, the velvets and silks and or-moulu, of their own Italian stucco palaces would always keep their showroom gloss, and steadfastly refuse to be invested with the look of home. The look which only a house wherein men have been born, and have loved and died, can ever wear. The one unpurchaseable quality that makes these quiet, unchanged old country houses dear, as are the faces of tried friends, to those who inherit and live in them.

The angle of Durant's Court faced south and west. At every season of the year sun and light were in all its rooms. Close without, two giant cedars sent up their immemorial fragrance from the smooth-shorn lawn. All through the summer, roses and honeysuckles clustered at every open bedroom window. In winter,

the old-fashioned smell of dried rose-leaves and lavender made you think of summer still. The house lay somewhat low, and on no side commanded a view beyond its own densely-wooded grounds. It was shut out from all sounds save those of its own small world; the very cawing of the crows was exclusive—the Court Rookery! All the changes, all the noise of the outer world touched it not. Year by year the same quiet servants went about the same routine of quiet duties, the same furniture stood in the rooms, the same smell of the roses mingled with the cedars in June, the same old portraits were lit up by the blazing wood-fires at Christmas. Nothing altered, nothing progressed there, save, within the last twenty years, one young girl's life. And even this had been so gentle a growth as scarce to bring about any vital change in the habits or customs of the house. At twenty, Lucia was a grown-up young woman, of course; but save that she no longer had a governess, and that she wore long dresses instead of short ones, and sat up as late as her papa and mamma at night, her life, and the lives of all about her, went on very much the same as they had done when she was ten.

It was an old joke of Gerald's, when he was a small boy, to say the Court was an enchanted palace sleeping for a hundred years, and that he would be the fairy prince bringing "love and pleasure, hope and pain," when he married Lucia. And little Lucia, with her doll in her arms, had laughed at the joke then. Latterly, the mention of their marriage had become much too solemn a thing to be spoken of in jest; nay, even to be openly spoken of at all. Lady Durant willed it so. It was very well when they were children; but no grown-up girl should listen to any talk of love or marriage until such time as the trousseau must be got ready. And Lucia, quite calm on the subject, had answered, "All right, mamma, not till the trousseau must be got ready;" while Gerald —well, Gerald, if truth is spoken, had acquiesced only too gladly in any abrogation of the duties of his courtship.

As part and parcel of the dear old place, he liked Lucia. Liked her as he liked the house, the cedars, the good old wines, the slow old carriage-horses, and everything else enclosed within the boundaries of the Court. Love he never had felt, never could feel, towards her: no, nor the feeling which, in the world he fre-

quented, amongst the men he associated with, is dignified by the name of love. Women of many grades and many nations had inspired his quickly-fired imagination long before he first saw Archie Lovell: Lucia never—Lucia, poor little Lucia—could awaken in him either sentiment or passion. She held something the place a man's favourite sister holds in his regard: scarcely that. A sister, to be a favourite one, must make herself your companion; and this, up to the present time, Lucia had never done; Lady Durant not holding favourable opinions of allowing a young girl to be the companion of any one save of her governess or her mother.

No woman of forty is thoroughly suited to begin, for the first time, to bring up a child's life. Lady Durant was more than forty when Lucia was born; her husband was fifteen years older than herself; and so the girl had grown up unnaturally staid and good, as the only child of elderly parents is almost sure to be. Lady Durant loved her devotedly,—more devotedly, perhaps, than some younger women love their daughters—but living so long in this shut-out existence, without children, save him whose few weeks of life had made her own so much more lonely, without companionship except her husband's, she had forgotten, too completely, the feelings of youth to become, in any wise, the companion of her child. When she was a girl, she had been brought up according to the doctrine of Mrs Hannah More, and according to these doctrines, a very little modified, she brought up her daughter. The genuine British idea of gravity being a virtue, *per se*, was rooted deep in Lady Durant's heart. As a baby, Lucia had been duly impressed with the notion that she must never laugh out of season, must repeat solemn words solemnly, *et cetera;* and as her high-pressure governesses made solemn teachings the main part of her education, the poor child, as time wore on, not only repeated solemn words, but all words in an unnaturally subdued tone, and with an unnaturally lengthy face. There was nothing stern, nothing unwomanly in Lady Durant's character. She simply held that prosaic, rigid, coldly-methodical theory of human life, in which a recognition of our capacity either for keen pleasure, or of the sense of the ludicrous, has no place. The mother of sons, her character might have become tenderer, more catholic—for girls

she held mediocrity to be the beau-ideal of perfection; and her daughter had certainly grown up the very incarnation of the prim, rigid, unimaginative system in which she had been reared.

Her face, as her photograph had told Archie Lovell, was singularly correct, as far as mere feature went. Colour, life, vigour, were all that was wanting to make her beautiful. Of these she was bereft. The development of children, after all, depends as much upon physical as upon moral causes. If the Court had stood upon a breezy upland, the old parents and the want of companions, and the excellent training of Lady Durant even, would not have sufficed to quench the buoyancy out of Lucia's childhood. But the Court lay low—sheltered from every wind of heaven—hemmed in by those glorious old trees, so favourable to the haunted peace of aristocracy, so antagonistic to the circulation of oxygen, which aristocratic and plebeian lungs appear to stand in need of alike! And so, after many years' indecision whether she would grow up at all, Miss Durant, of Durant, grew up a weed, much after the pattern of the pale, scentless flowers that grew under the shadow of the cedars on the lawn. You could look at her now and feel logically certain as to what she could be at thirty, or forty, or sixty. A man marrying her might feel assured that he took to himself as spotless a heart as any English household could produce; for the very ignorance of childhood was on Lucia still. But he must feel, also, that he could prophesy with accuracy concerning all the future years of his domestic life, and this to some men—to a man like Gerald especially—is a singularly depressing thought. Men of his temperament crave for amusement more, perhaps, than for any other possession. Lucia never could amuse any one. None of the little aberrations from the beaten track, which make a young, untutored girl so charming, were possible to her. Nothing that she said, nothing that she did, was ever unexpected. On mild platitudes she had been reared up; uttering and enacting mild platitudes she would live and rear up her children after her.

"Honest, fair, womanly," Gerald had often thought, when he watched his cousin's face, and looked onward to the life he would have to spend with her; fair, gentle, feminine, everything he admired most in women, and a bore. And about the strongest

aversion of Mr Durant's easy, epicurean nature was summed up in that one word.

Robert Dennison had mentally compared Miss Durant with his wife, awhile since, when Sir John spoke of no blood like Margaret Hall's running in the Durant veins. The comparison returned to him with double force when he came into the drawing-room and saw Lucia sitting there: her delicate face bent down beside the lamp, her wax-like hands buried in her embroidery, the whole, still figure in its dead-white dress, looking very much like one of Mr Sandys' beautiful rose-and-alabaster heroines (just ready to have "snowdrop," or "pearl," or "lily," emblazoned in gold letters at her feet). And Mr Dennison, whose taste inclined towards robust, Juno-like beauty, rather than towards ethereal heroines, felt in his heart that his low-born wife was handsomer, yes, and nobler-looking too, than Miss Durant, of Durant, with all her pale refinement—all her studied grace!

She turned her head at his entrance, smiling the pretty smile that she had been taught from her babyhood to accord to people, whether she liked them or not, and Robert came and seated himself by her side.

"Busy, as usual, Lucia. What elaborate piece of work are you employed upon now?"

"Nothing very elaborate, Robert; only a crest and initials. Do you like them?" and she put her work into his hands.

"G. S. D." and the Durant crest. Then, all this elaboration of delicate stitching, these fine interpolations of lilliputian lace-work, were for Gerald; and it was being worked under Lady Durant's own eyes. Robert Dennison returned the handkerchief to his cousin in a second.

"I admire your skill, Lucia, but I do not admire embroidery and lace-work for men. I always think a man who wears embroidery on his handkerchief ought to wear long, scented love-locks, and lace-ruffles at his wrists and throat, like one of the courtiers of Charles the Second."

"Why?"

"To be thoroughly in keeping, Lucia."

"But long hair and lace-ruffles are not the fashion now, and embroidered crests on handkerchiefs are."

"The fashion! A man need not follow fashion, like a girl, you know."

"Why not?"

"Because his aim is not to please by his pretty face and hands as hers is, and ought to be."

"Not by his pretty face, of course—pretty is never said of gentlemen—but by being handsome and well dressed. If I was a boy I would have well-made clothes, and good gloves and embroidered handkerchiefs, as Gerald does."

"And sit before the glass studying the fashion-books and the set of your ties, and whether lavender gloves or straw-colour became you most, I hope, Lucia?" said Robert, with a laugh.

"Oh, dear no, not if I was really a boy," answered Miss Durant, looking up into his face. "If I was really a boy, I suppose I should ride to hounds, and row, and play cricket, and be brave like Gerald is."

Of all persons in the world Robert Dennison found his cousin Lucia the most difficult to get on with. To a man whose forte lies in half statements, implied detraction, delicate innuendo, no human creature is so embarrassing as one of these matter-of-fact people who say "why?" to everything, and receive every statement made to them in its formal and literal meaning. If he had said, "Gerald is an empty-headed fop, Gerald spends his time before the glass trying on neckties and deliberating as to the colour of kid gloves," Lucia, after some consideration, might have admitted the new idea to her mind. His covert allusions to cavaliers and lace-ruffles and fashion-books, reached her apprehension very much as they would have reached the apprehension of a child of six. And this uncompromising simplicity, this invincible slowness of comprehension, really served Lucia as largeness of heart serves wiser people. Want of imagination kept her true; want of imagination made her just; up to the mark of a child's truth and of a child's justice.

"You should not be spoiling your eyes by lamp-light, Lucia, with such a moon as that telling you to go out in the fresh air," Mr Dennison remarked, after watching her quiet face for a minute or two. "Would it hurt you, do you think, to have a walk in the garden? A night like this is rather a treat, you know, to a poor smoke-dried Londoner like me." Robert Dennison had

reasons for wishing to talk to Lucia confidentially; and as he was to leave the Court before any of them would be up next morning, he knew that this would be his only opportunity of seeing her alone.

"Mamma, Robert wishes me to go out with him—may I?"

"What, at nine o'clock? Well, Lucia never does go out so late, Robert, on account of her throat; but if there is no dew, and you keep on the gravel—"

Dennison ran out through the window, and resting his hand down on the turf declared it to be as dry as the carpet; and then Miss Durant, with a shawl pinned round her head, as though she had been a very rheumatic old woman, was allowed to go out for ten minutes, with strict injunctions to walk fast all the time, and Dennison, resolving to make the most of his time, drew her hand within his arm and marched her far away at once from out of hearing of the old people.

"Robert has improved," remarked Sir John, when the sound of their footsteps had died away; "very much improved. Don't you think so, Jane?"

"Robert Dennison looks in good health," answered Lady Durant's measured voice; "but that I think he always did. What does he say of Gerald?"

"I don't mean improved in health," said Sir John, pettishly; "I mean improved in manners, in bearing, in every way. Robert is a young man who will make his way yet in the world, Lady Durant. You will see that."

"I always thought he would make his way, Sir John, in his own walk of life. His father was a person, I believe, who made his way in the world—was he not?"

"His father! Where is the good of talking in that way now, Lady Durant? You know very well I disliked this lad's father, and I don't think it's generous—no, by God! I don't think it's generous in you, Jane, to bring up the poor fellow's want of birth so constantly!"

"My dear Sir John—"

"Oh, it's all very fine, and of course you said nothing really against him; but I know your tone, and I know how you have felt all your life about Robert. It would be well for us both,

Jane, if we had thought more of him, and a little less of that scapegrace, Gerald; well for ourselves, and the honour of our family too."

When Sir John Durant took up an obstinate fit, you might as well have sought to move him by argument as to transplant one of his own cedars by a touch of your hand. He had worked himself into real anger towards Gerald this evening; and Lady Durant saw that very little was needed to push him into real amity towards Dennison.

"I don't know why you should say we have undervalued Robert," she remarked, very quietly. "I, for one, have ever been alive to his good, steady, hard-working qualities."

"And have made him your favourite? taken him to your heart as a son? promised him your daughter's hand? You have done all this for Robert Dennison, have you not, Jane?"

"No, Sir John, I have not," answered Lady Durant, firmly; "neither have you. Robert never has been, never can be, as near my heart as Gerald is. Gerald took the place to me of my own son, and whether he marries Lucia or not, he will hold it." And Lady Durant rose, and coming up close beside her husband's arm-chair, rested her hand down on his shoulder.

She was a handsome woman, looking ten years younger than her age; tall, upright, with the same pure cut features as Lucia, soft grey hair, braided low upon her forehead, and teeth and hands that still were beautiful. With all her sectarian, narrow-minded foibles there was a certain old-fashioned honesty, a certain womanly refined grace about Lady Durant (rare, perhaps, to meet among some of the more liberal-minded London matrons of the present day), that invested her with a charm still in the eyes of the husband of her youth. The calm stagnant atmosphere that had failed to develop the young girl's nature seemed to have preserved that of the mature woman in more than ordinary freshness: and as Sir John Durant looked up into his wife's face now, something about its unwonted emotion, the unwonted sight of tears within her eyes, touched him strongly—these good simple country people, who in their old age could still be moved by the expression of each other's faces! "I don't ask you to love Robert Dennison,

Jane. I know, keenly enough, how dear Gerald still is to us both. All I want is, that we should be just."

"In what way just, Sir John?"

"In not lavishing every good thing upon one lad to the exclusion of the other. We have given this house to be Gerald's home, we have promised to receive him as a son. That is enough. Enough, God knows! when we consider the gratitude he shows us in return."

"And what is this that you propose to do for Robert, then? Tell me. I would rather you told me. I will oppose you in nothing that you decide to be wise and just, even if all our happiness—Lucia's most—has to be sacrificed to what *you* feel to be duty!"

Wise words—words which showed that, whatever Lady Durant's errors might be regarding the training of daughters, she thoroughly understood those smaller tactics of domination which make a clever woman a good wife. In five minutes she was mistress of all the vague projects respecting Robert's advancement that had as yet vacillated across her husband's mind; and in a quarter of an hour Sir John Durant had had his biscuit and half-tumbler of weak brandy-and-water, and was walking up to his bed, not over sorry to take his wife's advice, and defer further conversation with "poor Robert" until his next visit to the Court—until Gerald, at least, had returned to England, and had been allowed one more chance of vindicating himself.

"But tell Robert from me that I shall not forget our conversation, Jane." The old man said this as his wife stood and dutifully looked after him from the drawing-room door. "And say that I hope to see him again before long—he may bring Conyers down with him, if he can—and then we'll talk matters over more seriously. And just tell him, too, I have never stayed up later than nine since my last attack. It looks unkind to the lad to go away without wishing him good-bye."

All of which Lady Durant very readily promised to do, and did, only with a shade less of cordiality in her manner than Robert Dennison could have desired.

Gain ascendency over his uncle he might, of that he felt

assured; over Lady Durant possibly, in time and with unflagging tact and perseverance; over Lucia never. With her hand resting on his arm, the moonlight shining on her face through the dark cloister of the overshadowing trees, here, in the old garden, where he had played with her any time ever since she could walk alone, Robert Dennison felt more embarrassed by this simple girl than he had ever felt by brow-beating judge or bullying brother barrister in his life.

"You—you don't inquire after Gerald," he remarked, when they had walked to the farthest terrace in the garden—Lucia's terrace, as it was called—and when several commonplace remarks had met with nothing but the girl's accustomed quiet "yes" or "no." "But perhaps you don't know that I have seen him?"—pressing the hand, ever so gently and compassionately, that rested on his arm.

"Yes, I know it. I heard from Gerald this morning."

"Oh! I did not know. Lucia, dear child, I must be candid I did not know that you and Gerald still kept up any correspondence."

Lucia was silent.

"In the present state of things between Sir John and Gerald, I must say, Lucia, that this surprises me."

"Did papa tell you to say this, Robert? Don't say it, please, unless he did. She dropped her hold of his arm, and looked up full at him as she spoke.

"Your father did not tell me to speak to you, Lucia. It is my own interest in you and in Gerald that makes me do so; however, I will say nothing unless you wish to hear it."

"I don't wish to hear anything against Gerald, Robert; that's all. I don't like you to tell tales of him now, any more than I used, years ago, when you were boys."

"And when you were—what, Lucia?—a wise little old lady of ten or eleven, but just the same, as Gerald says, just the same dear little model of good sense and propriety that you are now at twenty-one."

If he thought to pique her into anger, he was wholly unsuccessful. Gerald's opinion of her seemed to Lady Durant's daughter rather a compliment than otherwise.

"But I shall not be twenty-one till December the 16th. Gerald's birthday is in the same month, you know, ten days later.

"Ah, yes, and he will be twenty-six. That is the time at which the marriage was to have taken place, if it had taken place at all, was it not?"

"Of course, Robert. Why do you ask?"

"I wanted to see if one of you, at least, bore any remembrance of the old engagement in mind."

"Do you mean to tell me that Gerald does not?"

Dennison was silent.

"Do you mean to say that Gerald pretends to forget the old engagement, as you call it?"

But now Miss Durant's voice did tremble a little. Pride was the strongest feeling by far that she possessed; and Robert Dennison had at last succeeded in awakening it.

"I mean this, Lucia," he answered, in a soothing voice, "that Gerald's whole way of living shows him not to be a marrying man. Would any one, any man of common sense, who intended to be married in six months' time, rest quietly under such an imputation as lies on poor Gerald now?"

"I don't believe the imputation. I don't believe a word about Gerald and Maggie Hall."

"And your trust in him does you honour, Lucia, infinite honour! I did not question your good faith, remember, for a moment" (the girl's hand returned to his arm again), "but his. Has Gerald ever come forward and honestly sought to establish his innocence to your father and to you? If he has not, I repeat that he has not acted as any man with speedy intention of marriage in his heart must act."

In the morning Robert Dennison had first formed the idea of some day utilizing Gerald Durant's generosity to himself; had formed it; then put it away from his mind with a feeling of self-abasement at having thought so vile a thing. And now, seven or eight hours later—so quickly do a man's steps acquire impetus upon the downward road, he was putting it into practice with scarce a qualm. Miss Durant's heart swelled bitterly as she listened to him. She knew, only too well, that Gerald had not openly come forward as he might have done; that there had been

evident evasion on his part whenever Lady Durant had pressed him for proofs of his innocence; that he had acted, in short, not as a man would act in a case upon which the vital happiness of his life was at stake.

"I don't suppose Gerald is what is called in love with me, Robert," and she turned her pale face far away in the moonlight; "not in love as people are in novels and poetry, and all that. He knows we are to be married, and that every one looks upon it as settled, and so he just hasn't taken any trouble, I suppose, to set himself formally right with papa. I don't like it, mind," she added, "and I don't think Gerald has acted quite as he ought to have done, for my sake, but that's all the anger, all the malice, I shall ever feel against him. I *know* Gerald has had no part at all in the disappearance of Maggie Hall."

"Ah! If I ever have a wife, Lucia, may she be possessed of a heart and of a faith like yours. Gerald's tardiness in asserting his innocence is, you think, no presumptive proof even of his guilt."

"Please don't argue with me, Robert, or say anything legal. I know Gerald has had nothing to do with Maggie Hall's disappearance."

"May I ask why?"

"Because—Robert, I don't know that mamma would like me to talk about this to you."

"I am very sure she would, Lucia. I am very sure Lady Durant would judge my motives aright in having brought this subject forward."

"Very well, then, if you make me speak, I must. Gerald never once thought of Maggie in the way of admiration, because you—yes, you, Robert—were so in love with her yourself."

The unexpectedness of the blow made Robert Dennison literally stagger. Was it possible—this was his first thought—that Gerald or that Maggie had betrayed him after all?

"It is not a very flattering reason as far as I am concerned," went on Lucia, in her childish way; "but then Gerald never has pretended ever not to flirt because he was engaged, and if that had been all I might have believed this story, as other people have done. But Gerald would never have tried to rival you, never! I don't know why, but I feel it's a thing he would not have done."

"And may I ask if Lady Durant shares this idea of yours, my little wise Lucia?" asked Dennison, with a very sorry attempt at a laugh, as he spoke.

"Mamma? Oh, no! At least, I should think not. But then mamma never speaks of anything of the kind. The wise idea is mine, and mine alone, Robert; but I am not a bit less sure that I am right, for all that."

Dennison breathed freer again. The speech, after all, had been only one of those terrible guesses at truth which Lucia's stupid, unimaginative mind seemed to have the mysterious knack of making; a guess unfounded upon reason, and which the next idea that gained ingress into her small brain would dispossess."

"I wish it were as you think, my dear little cousin; but, glad as I should be to clear Gerald, I really must disclaim the honour you assign to me. I never even admired this Susan—no, Mary —Maggie Hall."

"Susan—Mary—Maggie! Why, Robert, you *lived* down at Heathcotes! You were always running after Maggie at one time. You had not a word to say but about Maggie's figure and Maggie's eyes; and now you pretend you don't even remember her name!"

The dark blood rose up on Dennison's face.

"I did not know you listened to this sort of scandal, Lucia. I should have thought you, of all girls, were beyond the village *on dits* and the gossip of the servants' hall," he exclaimed, angrily.

"I never heard anything from the servants, or in the village either. All that I heard was from you, and from poor Maggie herself."

Now Robert Dennison knew well that Lucia, as a little girl, had been familiar with Maggie Hall. Lady Durant, who would let her associate with none of the children of their rich manufacturing neighbours, having encouraged the child to be friendly, in a certain aristocratic, affable little way with all the tenants' children on her father's land. As Miss Durant, of Durant, grew to be a woman, her intimacy with the pretty dairy-maid had, of course, gradually subsided into a few kind words on one side, a humble curtsy and deferential answer on the other, when they chanced to meet. Still, much of the old feeling of companionship had doubtless survived the days of outward familiarity; and

Dennison trembled to think what confidence respecting himself might not, in some moment of unwonted condescension on Lucia's part, have been exchanged.

"Maggie was a vain, foolish girl," he remarked, coldly. "Women of that class are always thinking every man above them in rank must be in love with them."

"Maggie did not," answered Lucia. "And as to vanity, I wonder she was so little vain, considering how you all admired her. Why, I remember—let me see, it must be about a year ago—a few weeks before she went away, there were you and Mr Luttrell and Sir George Chester all wild about Maggie's good looks at once! It's absurd for you to deny it, Robert, or to say that you were not for ever running down on some excuse or other to Heathcotes—all of you."

"All of us; yes, Lucia. All of us—Luttrell, Chester, Gerald, and myself—but chiefly Gerald!"

"No, Robert; no, no, no," said Lucia, more firmly than he had ever known her to say anything in her life. "Gerald least of all. Gerald, in the way of attention or admiration, never."

"I can only repeat, Lucia, that when I marry, I hope my wife will be possessed of a simple trusting heart like yours. The subject is not one I can discuss more freely with you," added Robert Dennison, loftily, "and so we will leave it where it is." He most heartily wished, at that moment, that he had never gone near it at all. "I spoke to you in entire good faith, and with no thought but of your happiness, Lucia," he added, reproachfully; "and you certainly have turned the tables upon me in a way I had no right to expect."

"I have said what I think true, Robert, and I shall keep to it. Maggie Hall never thought of Gerald, never cared for him, except as she might have cared for papa or for any of us, and she did care for you. Why, I used to watch her face as she sat in the gallery at church, and when you only walked up the aisle, she would turn white and red by turns; and once when I met her in the park, not a week before she left, and I happened to mention you, she looked as if she could have fallen to the ground with confusion. Nothing on earth will change me: Gerald knows no more about Maggie Hall's disappearance than I do."

Just at this moment, Lady Durant's tall figure appeared in the moonlight a few paces from where they stood; and in another minute, much to her cousin's relief, Lucia was reminded of the falling dew and of her delicate throat, and sent off, like a little girl of six, to the house. Robert Dennison was in no mood to recommence the Maggie Hall controversy with another member of the family, but on their way back to the house he did vaguely attempt to sound Lady Durant on electioneering matters, and on Sir John's intentions respecting the candidate he meant to support in the coming struggle.

"I know no more about it all than you do, dear Robert," was Lady Durant's answer. "Your uncle is far, very far from strong at present, and it would not surprise me if, after all, he should take no part whatever in the election. Politics have never been his vocation, as you know; and, in spite of all the talk there has been about making Gerald stand, I have very much doubt, when it comes to the point, if your uncle or Gerald either will muster courage enough to go through the trouble of canvassing."

"Trouble!" repeated Dennison, bitterly. "Imagine any man thinking of trouble when the interests of all his future life are at stake. Indifferent as Gerald is, you surely do not hold so low an estimate of him as that."

"Well," answered Lady Durant, evasively; "my own opinion is that Gerald is a great deal too young, a great deal too unsettled in his beliefs, to think of public life at present. In another five years, when he has come to your age, and I hope to your steadiness, Robert, there may be some reason in talking of all this; but I really don't see how a boy who cannot yet legislate for himself, is to do any good to his country by attempting to legislate for others. Come in, Robert" (they had reached the drawing-room window now), "unless you wish to smoke your cigar, and hear Lucia sing. I want you to tell me what you think of her voice, and what songs there are in this new opera you spoke of at dinner that would be likely to suit her."

Robert Dennison spent another hour in friendly chat with Lady Durant; listened patiently to Lucia's songs; gave grave opinions as to the disorders of Sesame the parrot; drew a pretty little design for a new Sunday-school out of his own head; and wrote down

with infinite attention the different commissions in china and wool-work that he was to execute for his dear aunt before his next visit to the Court.

And still, in spite of all these amenities, and even of Lady Durant, a very rare event, tendering a cold cheek for him to kiss at parting, when Mr Dennison was on his road back to London next morning, it did not seem to him as though his journey into Staffordshire had been a thoroughly successful one.

CHAPTER X.

"MY LIFE IS WEARY."

Reader, have you ever known what it was to be brought to bay with fortune, when you were living alone in a common London lodging? It is a condition of human wretchedness the like of which cannot, I think, exist in the country. A new-ploughed field, a leafless forest, a snow-spread common, every dreariest country sight, could never surely equal the dreariness of this great sea of human faces, the solitude of these Bable-tongued streets, the utter homelessness of these rooms, with their dingy furniture, their airless atmosphere, their inhuman landlady. Had that last interview of Robert Dennison and his wife taken place anywhere else in the world, Maggie might possibly have rallied after it. She was a girl, with all a girl's fresh springs of life in her heart still; and who shall say that a sight of blue sky, a waft of garden-flowers, a word from a hearty country tongue, might not just then have been her salvation? But she got none of these, and she went straight to despair, as I shall show you.

"If you betray me I swear I will never touch your hand, never look upon your face save as a stranger, again."

The words rang in her tender heart as the burthen of an unhallowed song will ring through and torture some pure soul in the delirium of brain-fever. The mask was off at last, and she saw her life bared before her; her life, not as she wanted it to be, but as it was. Her occupation was gone. She would never, or not for

years, which at her age is the same as never, live with Robert openly before men as his wife. In winter evenings she would not share his fireside; in winter nights her head would rest on a lonely pillow; in long summer days like this she would have to drag through the hours without husband, or home, or work (the last, although she did not know it, the direst privation to her). She had no high ambition. She had married Robert for love; not because he was a gentleman. A nice little cottage with a garden, the household to look after, Robert to love, children some day to nurse and work for, these, with perhaps the natural adjuncts of a very bright dress and bonnet for Sunday, had been the limits of her wildest dreams. They were over now. Robert was not going to live with her. Robert, of his own free will, had proposed that she should go away from England; had threatened that if she betrayed him, he would never look upon her face again. Her life, her hope, her desire had died by a solitary cruel blow; as yours and as mine have done perhaps, ere now, reader! and no kindly accident befell her, as in your case and in mine it may have done, to save her body from following the death of the soul.

She sat in the place where he had left her all the evening, the evening during which he was eating his excellent dinner, drinking his excellent wine at the Court, blankly staring at the pattern of the paper on the opposite wall, and at one wretched daub of a picture that hung there, and seemed in some sort to force itself as a human companion upon her. This picture was a portrait in oils of a fair, full-blown woman of middle age, dressed in black satin, with a grand lace-collar, a brooch, watch-chain, and rings upon the fat fingers, that were crossed blandly in front of her ample waist, an aunt or mother of the landlady's probably. Was she happy? Maggie wondered vaguely. Had this woman had a husband who loved her and let her live under his roof? Had children kissed her face, children's arms clung around her neck? With a sickening jealousy she felt sure, somehow, that these things had been so. Content was written on all that smooth face and corpulent figure. The woman had possessed what made her life good, or she would never, at forty-five, have had the heart to dress out in her best, and sit down and smirk and fold her hands before a portrait-painter.

"Fancy me, five-and-twenty years on, wanting my faded face to be put in a picture!" the girl thought. "And now that I am twenty, there's no one that wants it—no one that wouldn't be glad over me the day I was put into my coffin and hid away. And I am handsomer than ever that woman could have been when she was young!" And then she got up, for the first time since her husband had left, and went and examined herself in the two feet of looking-glass that hung over the fire-place.

It was a glass that, like others of its kind, lengthened and flattened the features, and gave a sickly green hue to the skin; but when she had looked in it, in the white dress and with the flower in her breast, before Robert came, Maggie had thought, in spite of all defects, what a pretty girl she was. She made no allowances for the glass now. She saw a pale hard-lined face, without beauty, without grace, without youth. This face was hers; and the thought that she was not even handsome any longer, gave a sharp finishing blow to her heart—the sharpest blow, perhaps, that, in her present state, she could have received.

Late in the evening the lodging-servant brought in her tea as usual. She was a slip-shod, gaunt-eyed child of sixteen, with a brain confused by constant bells and scoldings, and limbs prematurely exhausted by excessive work; a poor, stealing, falsehood-telling little London slavey, but attached to Maggie because she was lenient as to cold meat, and had given her a faded Paris bonnet or two, and an old smart parasol.

"Law, Miss, how dull you must be, sitting alone here! If I'd a' known the gentleman were gone I'd a brought the tea-things up before. Wouldn't you like a slice of 'am with your tea now, miss? I can run over the ways in a minute and get a plate for you. Fourpence-halfpenny the quarter of a pound."

The offer was not a disinterested one. Maggie, in her attempts to get away from the loathsome lodging cooking, had had plates of cut ham before; on each of which occasions the half-starved girl, knowing that the second-floor never "troubled" about her cut meat, had had what to her was a saturnalia of animal food on her way down to the kitchen. But the hoarse voice that spoke, the eyes that looked at her from that dirty face, were human, and a choking sensation rose in Maggie's throat. Here was one person

at least on the earth—this poor forlorn lodging-house drudge—who would not stand by hard-eyed, as every one else in London, in the world, would, and see her misery!

"I'm not hungry, Mary, thank you. I made a pretty good dinner. Just bring my bedroom candle up at once and"—she hesitated strangely as she said this—"you can eat the cold lamb for your own supper if you like. I shan't want it any more."

When she was alone she drank a cup of tea, and then tried to put some bread between her lips. She could no more have swallowed it than have swallowed a stone; it seemed hard and tasteless, quite unlike any food she had ever eaten in her life, and something in this new sensation frightened her. Was she going to be ill, alone, here?—to be ill and to die, perhaps, without seeing Robert again; without letting the people "down home" know that she never had been a wicked girl, or disgraced them while she lived!

She went across to her window, seated herself, and looked wearily from behind the blind at such life as at this time of an August evening was to be seen in Cecil Street. If she could only tire herself she would sleep, she thought; and, after she had slept, things might look different. And so she stayed on and on, until the city clocks chimed midnight, and till the aching heaviness of her eyes and brain made her hope that forgetfulness indeed was at hand.

But it was not. When she had undressed herself—for the first time in her life not folding her clothes neat and trim, but leaving them lying on the floor, just as they fell from her—when she had undressed herself and laid her head down on her pillow, instead of sleep her sorrow came back to her with redoubled strength. This fact of no longer caring for herself made her realize how utterly she was uncared for by Robert. Till to-night she had always liked the labour of brushing her hair; did not he admire it?—telling her that its silky smoothness, its glossy black, were lovelier than all the red-dyed, frizzled locks of fashionable ladies; had liked to hang up her dress and speculate as to whether she could wear it one more day to "look fresh" or not; had sat often half an hour or more trying this little bit of finery or that before the glass, and feeling a zest and pleasure in her good looks as she noted

the effect of each. All this was over. He had ceased to love her. What good was her youth or her beauty? What interest had she in her hair or dress, in anything, for the matter of that? A girl without a girl's vanities; a wife without a wife's honour. This was to be her future life. No use glozing it over. She was not to live with Robert. Unless she forfeited the last possibility of his love, she was never to tell the people down home that she was not living a life of shame. And then the burthen of all her misery, Robert Dennison's last cruel threat, rang again and again through her heart.

One, two, three o'clock struck; and still her eyes had not closed. She was unused to sleeplessness, and, like the bitter taste of the bread, it frightened her. Could she do nothing to get sleep —one blessed hour of sleep—ten minutes—any sleep to stand between her and yesterday? In the cupboard of her sitting-room, she remembered, there was a little bottle of laudanum that the landlady had once persuaded her to send for when she had face-ache. Perhaps if she drank some of it it might send her off, or make her forget herself, or ease her heart in some way. She got up, struck a light, and went and fetched the bottle from the adjoining-room. "Laudanum—Poison," was all the information the label conveyed. People who buy laudanum generally understand the quantity of it that will suit their purpose. At all events the law of England does not require chemists to give them any more special information than that of "Poison." Maggie held the bottle up to the candle and wondered what was the quantity she ought to take. She had a profound instinctive horror, like all country people, against medicine, and was resolved not to take an over-dose. The rector's wife down home used to take a table-spoonful of some mixture of this colour for palpitation, she remembered; but she wouldn't take as much as a table-spoonful herself. She would try a tea-spoonful first, and if she didn't feel better, take more in half an hour. And so she measured out a tea-spoonful, she who had never had opium in any shape, never taken a narcotic or a stimulant stronger than elder wine, and put it to her lips.

Had she swallowed it, the story of Mr Dennison's future life might have been a very different one: but the bitter vapid flavour

of the laudanum made her leave more than a third in the spoon. She took in reality between thirty and forty drops perhaps; a powerful dose for her with her overwrought brain and exhausted frame; then put out the light, laid her head down tight upon her pillow, and resolved to force herself to sleep.

And the mockery of sleep did, for a time, overcome her. When she had been still about a quarter of an hour a sort of stupor, for the first time that night, stole over her brain; a delicious feeling of relaxation accompanied by ever so faint a sense of numbness, made her tightly-clasped hands fall asunder from her breast; and she began to think, with an indescribable ecstatic joy, of the fresh green fields and shady lanes of Heathcotes. This lasted—who shall say how long? she could not have told herself, when next morning she looked back upon the night, whether it was for a moment or for an hour: then, suddenly, a loud rumbling noise, some heavily-laden waggon going down the Strand already, though day was not yet breaking, brought her back with a start of consciousness to where she was, a semi-consciousness more horrible by far than all the hours before, when she had lain wide awake, and thinking with clear vision of her trouble. Bodily pain of the acutest form was added to her suffering now. Her mouth was parched and poison-tainted; an iron hand seemed to clench her head; every limb felt tortured by its position, and yet unable to move from it. It was a waking nightmare; for awake she was: the light from the street-lamps, mixing already with some greyish oncoming of morning, fell upon the furniture around the room, and she saw it all distinctly. She was here in Cecil Street, and Robert had been cruel to her—the eternal burthen here still! and her life was spoilt, and she was not to have home or peace or honour for weary years. Not one sharp point blunted of her actual grief! And then again, close following upon this, and horribly mingling with Cecil Street and the dingy furniture of her rooms, she saw the fields at Heathcotes, no longer green and fresh; but parched, desert, stony. And she toiled through these fields long, seeking her herd in vain, and when at length she came upon them, they took fright and rushed away from her a space, and then turned and looked at her. And Daisy, and Star, and Flower, the dainty gentle beasts she had tended as if they had been her sisters,

were gentle no longer. They had hard ferocious eyes; they had human faces; they changed into a crowd of men and women, a noisome crowd on a London pavement, and she was among them, fainting, and alone, and crying for Robert! And Robert did not come. The hoarse din from the now-awakening streets, not the voice that should have soothed her, broke in on her dream again; and then with a start she sprang from her pillow, and found that day—God! another fresh, happy, summer day—was shining in upon her face.

The very thought of sleep had become too hideous for her to attempt to court it again. She got up, and with stiffened, aching limbs, tottered across the room to the window, opened it, and looked out. Five o'clock struck at this minute—the hour at which, summer and winter, she had left her bed at Heathcotes; and suddenly all the scene upon which her little chamber window looked, rose up with vivid distinctness upon her memory. She saw it as it must be looking now on this fair August morning. The sycamore that brushed her pane, and shaded half the trim-kept flower-garden in front of the farm-house; the laurel hedge and wicket-gate that bounded the garden from the road; the village-green and the horse-pond; the town-tree and the foot-worn space where the children played beneath its shade,—in fancy she could see it all; could hear the cawing of the rooks in the distant woods of the Court; the hearty voices of the harvesters as they started, their sickles slung across their shoulders, to their work. Her fancy showed her this: what did her senses show her in the flesh? Houses black with smoke, with gas, with all the nameless exhalations of London, barring the sky away not thirty feet from her window. In the street beneath, the following human beings: —A youngish-looking man, his face half deadly pale, half fever-flushed, walking along with slouching steps, and with no great-coat to hide his embroidered wine-stained linen, the remnant of a dandy's bouquet in his button-hole; his well-cut but disordered evening clothes; a man about whom it was safe to assert that his night had been spent in losing money—perchance higher things than money—and who was now carrying away with him the time-honoured fruit of such pleasure. Two wan-faced girls, with holes in their boots and mock roses in their hats, the elder of whom

looked about seventeen. A man or woman, a human being at least, huddled in rags, drunk or asleep on the doorstep of an opposite house. Finally, and approaching the last-named object, doubtless to move it on from unconsciousness back to despair—a policeman.

The morning, of course, had broken upon thousands of pure and happy lives in London on that second day of August. These were the lives on which Maggie chanced to see it dawn: the servants of sin: the waif and stray of the street: the mechanical wooden-faced representative of the law. Of each of the two first classes she had only such acquaintance as an honest-nurtured country girl could have; but scanty as was her real knowledge of life, one thing about these people was as distinctly patent to her at that moment as it was ever to the statesman or philanthropist who makes such subjects his study—their misery. Was the man in his evening dress a sensualist, a gambler, reaping only the rightful harvest he himself had sowed? Maggie neither knew nor reckoned. She had had one look of his bloodless face as he went along, and it was miserable. Were those young girls—the age of Miss Lucia's eldest Sunday scholars at home—to be accounted sinners, or sinned against? She never thought about it. They were hollow-eyed and hoarse-voiced; for she heard a sorry word from one of them as they passed: they were miserable. And the human animal crouched in rags that the policeman was already attempting, not too gently, to dislodge from its brutal sleep? Miserable, miserable. Where was providence? Where was God's mercy? Had He forgotten all these people? Was she to know for certain that He had not forgotten her? Down home there was the little church still, and the minister's pitying voice to call back to rest all those who laboured and were heavy laden; down home there were Miss Lucia and Lady Durant to speak to on Sundays, and Sir John himself to be the friend of every one who hungered, or who sinned. But home was shut against her: lost for ever, unless she regained it at the horrible price of losing Robert. And salvation out of Heathcotes, happiness without Robert, seemed alike impossible to her—nay, the very idea of alien consolation never even crossed her mind. All her nature was love. Common sense, hope, religion itself, had gone down in the crash that love had newly sustained.

During the day that followed food passed Maggie's lips twice. A mouthful of bread loathingly swallowed for breakfast; another smaller quantity with a cup of tea in the afternoon. She was no longer frightened at its bitter taste now. She had grown apathetic to the wan image, with lustreless eyes and bloodless cheeks, that looked at her from the glass as she moved about the room. If she was going to be ill, did it matter much? She would see Robert once first; of that she was resolved; then lay her head down on the first stone she came to, and die. Death couldn't be very much worse than her sleep had been after she took the "stuff" last night. She hadn't been a bad girl; she was not much afraid of death. Only—only she must see Robert, kiss his lips again, and make him swear to tell them down in Staffordshire that she had been his wife, and had not brought disgrace on them while she lived.

At about six o'clock she went to her bedroom, packed up all her clothes and trinkets, carefully labelling her boxes "Miss Neville," the name she went under, and then sent for the landlady and paid her her bill. She was going to leave England—this was the story she always told when she left her different lodgings—but was to spend a couple of days with a friend in another part of London first. Her boxes should be sent for, either to-night or to-morrow morning.

This done she put on her shabby walking-things; said good-bye to the servant, pressing her dirty hand lightly as she deposited in it a parting gift, and then left the house and walked slowly away towards the Temple.

Her white forlorn face met with scanty notice in the streets: an occasional rude stare or jostle, perhaps, amidst the crowd of men hurrying westward from the city: but nothing so marked as to frighten her until she had nearly reached Temple Bar, when the following incident befell her: an incident almost laughable to write or read about, but that was fraught with intensest agony to her, coming at the time it did.

In her hurry of going out she had taken small notice of how she dressed; had put on her shawl awry perhaps; or folded it so as to trail on the dusty pavement as she walked. Something, at all events, there was in her appearance—the dingy velvet hat in

August, possibly—which attracted the notice of a small errand-boy of about eleven, who, an empty basket over his shoulder, was loitering at an eating-house window whistling the last street tune vehemently as she went by. Her eyes chanced to meet his; and in a second he had twisted his features into a grimace, diabolically expressive of amusement and contempt: the genuine gamin's weapon of aggression all over the world. The blood rushed into Maggie's face, and her tormentor with delight saw that he had got hold of a bit of amusement. The girl had "risen," an accident that not once in a thousand times occurs to these urchins among a London crowd. What followed I hate to write of. He pursued, or more truly preceded, her by about two steps; looking back into her face; and ever and anon giving whoops or unearthly whistles, in that sort of ventriloquistic tone which long warfare with the police teaches to the whole gamin race. He asked slang questions about the poor black velvet hat, he put her through the whole *peine forte et dure* with which his education had acquainted him.

In happier days Maggie would have been as callous as any woman living to the child's persecution—if indeed it amounted to persecution; he was but indulging his instinct for sport, as anglers or hunstmen do, unmindful of his victim's pain. She was no carefully-nurtured lady, but a robust country peasant girl, accustomed to keep a dozen rough farm-servants as much in their place as she liked; but in her present state of bodily and mental abandonment, this child's conduct seemed like the last indignity that fortune could offer her. She had sunk so low that children mocked at her as she walked abroad in the streets! Writhing under his jokes and grimaces, ever hoping that she had lost her tormentor in the crowd, and ever seeing his mocking face again just ahead of her, again she went on until she had passed Temple Bar. Then, suddenly, the thought struck her that she must be close to where Robert lived. What would he think of her arriving on foot and with soiled dress; perhaps with this dreadful companion jibing at her even at his door. With an abrupt impulse she turned and spoke to him:

"Where is the Temple, please? I'm quite a stranger here."

Her voice was hoarse and weak, and the words came falteringly from her dry lips.

"The Temple? why this be the Temple, in here to the right." With the first word his victim spoke the gamin had become human. He looked at the woman with a sort of pity. A human creature who could walk along the Strand and ask the way to the Temple was something removed from his experiences altogether. She wasn't drunk, he saw, nor an idiot; the two phases of humanity most exquisitely ludicrous to a street-boy's perceptions; perhaps, in spite of her shabby hat, she was a lady too grand to know her way, and ready and able to present halfpence to persons who should point it out.

This last wild imagination was confirmed on the spot by the woman drawing out a purse from her pocket. She took a shilling from its scanty contents, and held it to him. "Get me a cab, child," she said, faintly. "I can go no farther."

"It isn't thirty yards," said the boy, "nor twenty neither. I'll show you the way—just where you see the Bobby a-standing."

He gazed at her in a sort of rapture. It was the first time in his life he had possessed a shilling of his own; and the vague fear struck him that if a cabman even were called upon the scene his unlawful gains might be wrested from him.

"It ain't worth while to call a cab, it's only as fur as that there Bobby," he repeated. "You come alonger me, and I'll show you the way, miss."

The voice even of this child, who had hunted her down in her misery, had power to touch Maggie yet. It was a good sign that he spoke civilly to her, she thought. Could Robert spurn her when even this little outcast of the street behaved humanely to her at last?—forgetting, poor heart, that the humanity had been purchased by a shilling?

The foolish thought gave her failing limbs strength to totter on anew. The child, hiding his shilling cunningly in his brown hand, guided her past the "Bobby" to her destination, and in another five minutes Maggie stood, her breath coming in sobs, the cold dews standing thick around her whitened lips, at the door of her husband's chambers.

CHAPTER XI.

ADRIFT IN LONDON.

THERE were few things Robert Dennison undertook which he did not do well, but, perhaps, the giving of small dinner-parties was the one thing in life he did best. No man better understood, than he, how to introduce his wines at exactly the proper moment; no man better understood—the ulterior object of the evening being loo—how to promote conviviality among his guests, and yet keep his own brain cool and collected, as a host's should be. His little dinner on the 2nd of August, his last party this season, promised to be an unusually successful one. Gerald Durant's place was to be filled up by another guileless Guardsman, young Sholto McIver (a blue-eyed boy, to whose somewhat vacuous face Mr Dennison had taken one of his sudden kindly fancies), and the other three guests were all of them young men, and of the cheerful, open disposition he best liked in his companions.

"I don't care a bit about whether I win or lose," he was accustomed to say, with charming frankness, when play was discussed. "In fact, I care very little really about cards, as cards; but when three or four men dine together, a game of loo serves to pass away the evening, and what I do like is to have fellows who will play pleasantly; one ill-tempered man spoils the enjoyment of the party."

So on the present occasion there was not one ill-tempered man invited. All were delightfully fresh in the belief that to take "miss," when first in hand, is a winning system of playing loo; also that Robert Dennison was one of the best-hearted, most genial fellows living. And, in very good temper, Mr Dennison had seen to the arrangement of the table and the wines; and now, just at the moment when his wife rang at the bell, was finishing dressing in the adjoining room; whistling low to himself an air from Fidelio, but incorrectly—an ear for music was the one gift Robert Dennison did not possess—as he gave the last finishing touch to his incomparable whiskers, before putting on his coat.

Maggie was announced to him vaguely, by his boy, as "a young

person;" and expecting to see the lad from the confectioner's with the ice, or the girl from Covent Garden with the peaches for dessert, Mr Dennison, after a minute or two, walked good-humouredly into the dining-room, admiring the newly-shaped nails of his white hands, as he walked, and whistling, still out of tune, that air from Fidelio.

Maggie had turned with her face away from the bright evening light, and for one moment after he entered he saw only the gilded outline of a woman's figure, standing with her back to the window, and did not recognize her. She was about the height of the girl who brought his fruit and flowers from Covent Garden.

"Half an hour late, again," he cried, in his kindly, condescending way; "half an hour late, again. I suppose I must excuse you this time, but—Maggie!"

She had lifted her veil, and with a sudden movement was at his side.

"Don't be angry, Robert! please don't be angry—I shan't do it again, but I wearied so to see you!" And she caught his hand, his cool, newly-washed hand, smelling of almond soap, and set off by stud and ring, and faultless linen, and held it tight between her own poor shabbily-gloved ones, then lifted it to her lips. "Don't be angry with me, Robert, now don't! It is for the last time."

Robert Dennison's face grew dark with passion.

A man not at all a villain might well be enraged at such a visit, when any moment might bring three or four open-eyed bachelor friends into his chambers. But he kept his presence of mind and, instead of speaking at once, thought. What would be the quickest way of getting rid of her? To take care that no such visit should ever, by possibility, occur again would be to-morrow's work. In the first moment that he recognized her he decided about that. His task now was to get rid of her: noiselessly, good-humouredly, quickly; above all, quickly.

"I don't want to be angry with you, Maggie, but really you ought not to have come here. Some men are coming to dine with me, and if you were to be seen, you know, it—"

"It wouldn't matter much," she interrupted him, in a voice curiously unlike her own, and with a short, bitter laugh. "They don't know you are married, and you could easily explain my being

here. They'd none of them be much struck by my beauty, for certain! The worst they could do would be to joke you a bit for your want of taste. Look at me, Robert," turning her face suddenly round to the light. "I'm not looking handsome to-day, am I?"

Her pure, marble skin was saffron-hued; her bloodshot eyes had lost their brilliancy and their colour; a strange drawn look about the mouth had oldened her by ten years from what she was when Dennison had seen her last.

"You are looking very ill, Maggie—awfully ill! This kind of thing won't do at all. You are fretting yourself to death, child, about nothing. Now, just let me send for a cab at once, and do you go home, like a good girl, and to-morrow—"

He moved his hand out towards the bell, but she caught tight hold of it again. "If you send for a cab for me I won't go in it. Where am I to go to? What do you mean by 'home?' I've paid off the lodgings and left them. You may send for my things to-morrow, if you like; and there is nowhere for me to stop but here. Robert, will you let me stop here? It's my rightful place, you know."

Then Robert Dennison scrutinized his wife's face and way of speaking more closely, and a new suspicion overcame him—a horrible, a gross suspicion; but remember, his mind was gross, unimaginative, unsympathetic, ever putting the coarsest, most common-place interpretation on the action of every man or woman with whom he had to deal. That sallow skin, this thick utterance, those lustreless eyes, those trembling hands! How could he have been so blind as not to see the true state of the case at once? It was not a matter for argument or gentle treatment at all. This miserable girl had sought the usual refuge women of her birth do seek under their vulgar troubles; this girl whom he had been madly in love with, his wife, whom in another five minutes three or four of his friends would find in such a state as this in his chambers.

"You will get into a cab in one minute's time, and you will go to your lodgings. Tell the people you have changed your mind, and must stop there another night, and to-morrow, to-morrow early, I shall see you." And with no very gentle force he took her hand from his, and rung the bell.

Maggie stood passive while he ordered the boy to get a cab, "a four-wheeled cab immediately for this lady." Then, when they were alone, she came close to him again, and put her arm up round his neck. "I'm glad I've been here, dear," she whispered, unconscious of the repulsion of his face, "I'm glad I've seen you looking like this." She passed her hand half-frightened, half-admiring, over the silk facings of his dress-coat. "You were dressed so the first evening I ever began to think of you, Robert; the evening that you walked down to the farm with the other gentlemen after dinner. You were the handsomest of them all; and you joked me and asked me if I'd got a sweetheart; and then, when the rest were gone—do you mind?—you stopped and talked to me over the laurel hedge; and when you went away you asked me to walk next night by the plantation, and I went. Ah, I'm glad I've seen you, dear! It has made me soft again. Robert, I have always loved you. Mind that when I am gone."

He shifted uncomfortably from her clasp. The pure warm arm around his neck, the satin head upon his breast, her words, her gentleness, recalled to him Maggie in the days of his short-lived passion for her, and shamed him out of his base suspicion of a minute ago. But his eyes fell at this very moment upon the time-piece, and he saw that it wanted five minutes only to eight o'clock, and at eight o'clock his friends he knew would be in his room.

"I don't know what you mean by 'gone,' Maggie. You are no more likely to die than I am; and as to leaving in any other way, you told me pretty plainly yesterday your intentions about that."

"And I'm of the same mind still, Robert. Are you? Are you determined still you will not have me to live with you?"

"My dear girl, what is the use of discussing all this now? We settled everything yesterday, very amicably indeed, as it seemed to me."

"I see. I won't keep you any longer. I'll go away quietly at once, for fear your friends should come. How comfortably you live here, Robert!" for the first time looking about her and examining all the luxury of that bachelor room, its pictures, its velvet hangings, its divans, the perfect dinner equipage upon the table. "It all looks so nice after—well, that don't matter now—

I shan't go back there any more. Is this your bedroom in here? Let me see it. I won't be a moment. I'd like to see every room you live in before I go."

Robert Dennison hesitated. Then it occurred to him that he had best humour her awhile, if only to keep her in her present temper, and he pushed open the door of his bedroom for his wife to enter. The chambers were small, in accordance with Mr Dennison's present modest means, and there was no room that he could use as a dressing-room; so all his toilet appliances were, per force, in his bed-chamber. They were costly in the extreme, and neatly arranged, although he had just finished dressing, as if they came from a valet's hands. Maggie walked up to the table and examined them curiously.

"I remember this little bottle, Robert; you bought it for me in Paris. These ivory-handled brushes, and this, and this," and she pointed out one or two little trinkets, "you had upon our wedding tour. All the rest are new. I mean, I never saw them before. You have everything so nice—and lace, too, real lace, on your toilet-cover. Robert, I'm glad I've seen how you live. I know now you could never have been happy in the poor way that would have been enough for me. I don't wonder so much that you didn't care to come and see me in the lodgings. I know now how ugly and dingy everything must have seemed to you. That dreadful room, with its bare floor, and the dark, dull paper." And indeed she shuddered at the thought of that mean garret in which her last miserable night had been passed.

"I am a poor man, Maggie," said Robert, sullenly; for he began to think that kindness was not the way to make her hurry her visit, "and I can keep you no better than I have done. The things you are so bitter about are things I had before my marriage. God knows there has not been much money for spending on useless trumpery since."

"No, of course there has not," she answered, quickly; "and I don't want any of them. I want nothing any more. Robert, dear, won't you say good-bye to me kindly?"

"Of course I will; there, there, that will do. Now, be sensible, Maggie, and go back to your lodgings; they are not at all bad lodgings in their way, and I'll come to-morrow, if I can, and—"

"You'll not find me there, Robert. I am going away. I am telling you no untruth."

"How do you mean going away? I don't know what you mean, child."

Mr Dennison's lips trembled nervously. In that moment a glimmering, a horrible suspicion of the truth flashed across him, and his heart leaped. She had threatened him before in her fits of passion to make away with herself. How, if the threat he had so often sneered at had meaning in it after all. He did not dwell upon the thought. In the dark days to come he strove to say to himself that he had never really for one moment entertained it. But his heart leaped. This he knew right well. This haunted him—haunts his pillow still. His heart leaped. And he spoke no one tender word, gave no one kindly look of returning love, when a word or look of his might have brought Maggie back in a moment from the shadow of the dark valley to hope and to life!

"What I mean? No, Robert, you needn't know; you will know soon enough, perhaps. At all events, I shan't trouble you any more. After I have gone away you'll think of me kindly, dear, won't you? And if ever a day should come when you can say a word for me to them at home, you'll tell them I was an honest girl always, Robert? Promise me that!"

"Of course, of course, Maggie. Everything will be set right some day. I told you so yesterday;" and he took his watch out uneasily, and held open the door for her to go out.

She stood silent for a moment, a bright flush rising up over her white face; then she walked quickly across the room, laid her head down on Mr Dennison's fine lawn-covered pillow, and kissed it. "Robert"—she had come to him again, and was looking straight into his eyes—"I'd have been a good wife to you. If ever you are free and marry a lady born, she'll not love you better than I did. If—if"—she was uttering her last hope, and it almost choked her in the utterance—"I don't ask you; but, Robert, if you would let me live with you, I think I could learn to be a lady yet."

At this moment the time-piece in the next room struck eight.

"Will you go, or will you not?" exclaimed Mr Dennison, with

savage emphasis. "I want you to leave the place quickly. Don't oblige me to make the servant a witness of this lovely scene."

She shrank away instantly from him, like a beaten child; never touched his hand, never sought his lips again, but walked across the sitting-room and out upon the stairs, and away from the house, without so much as turning back her head. Some dim hope, some human longing, at least, for life, had haunted her heart to the last. When she laid her head upon the pillow—that was its place by right—a flood of tears had been ready to flow forth and heal the over-wrought brain. A kiss from Robert's lips then, and she had cast herself at his feet, ready to be his slave for evermore, but instead of the kiss had come words crueller than a blow—and she had obeyed them! And life was over; she knew it now. She had not another hope, not the shadow of a hope, left. Life was over.

The cabman held open the door of his cab as he watched her come out; but she passed on without even seeing him—on out of the Temple into Fleet Street again. The world had got quieter, it seemed to her, during the half-hour that she had been with Robert. The light had faded somewhat; the crowd upon the pavement grown less dense. It would be easier to die now than when the world seemed so marvellously full of life—the sunshine gilding every human face that met her in the crowd! easier still in another hour or two, when the light should have died away altogether, and the streets be more at rest, and the river flowing on dark and silent as she had so often watched it of a night from that bay-window of her lonely lodging in Cecil Street.

She walked on, without feeling very tired now, and at last found herself standing among two or three hungry-looking wretches before the window of a pastry-cook's shop. There were some little three-cornered tarts upon a plate on the counter, and she thought she could eat one, and went in and bought it; but the woman who gave her change stared at her, or Maggie thought so, and she felt too ashamed to sit down, and went out again.

"You have left the tart," called out the woman; but she went on out of the shop without turning. The smell of food had made her deadly sick, and she did not care to meet the woman's eyes

again. If she could have a glass of water, she thought, she could drink it; but she had not courage to go into another shop. People looked at her suspiciously, she began to feel. The last policeman she met turned his head after her, she was sure, when she had passed. She must get away into a quiet street, some street, if she could find it, near the river; or upon a bridge—London Bridge, surely, could not be very far away—and crouch into a corner where no one would see her, and wait. Wait for night and peace and rest, eternal rest, and forgetfulness of Robert.

She went on and on along Fleet Street, on up Ludgate Hill, and past St Paul's; then, directed by a little girl of whom she took courage to ask the shortest way to the river, through a labyrinth of the small streets or lanes intersecting that part of the city between Thames Street and the water—lanes made up of warehouses and granaries, with a narrow track of road just wide enough for one waggon to pass, and with weird-looking galleries or gangways stretching across overhead. London, in these regions, is wonderfully quiet at eight o'clock of a summer evening. Sometimes a whole lane, or block of warehouses and offices, would be closed, with scarce a single passer-by to break the silence; and at last, in a certain narrow passage, more deserted even than the rest, the loneliness seemed so profound that Maggie took courage to creep inside a portico before an office and sit down. The river was quite close here; she could hear the occasional dull splash of the tide; could see the masts of the barges and funnels of the river-steamers passing up and down; and she turned her head from the sight and bent it down on her lap. She wanted, she hungered to die; and yet the sound of the river, the sight of the vessels, made her afraid. To die, in theory, had been easy enough; but these brought before her the actual physical terrors of death. She took off her gloves, and held her bare hands before her face with a sort of feeling of comfort from their warm touch. She turned her head, as I have said, from the river. She felt that life—any life, life without Robert even—was sweet. If, at that moment, she could be back in her lodgings, she thought, how good it would be to see the servant-girl's face, and to have her supper, and go to her bed and sleep. The close, dull rooms, the noisome food, the ceaseless din from the streets

without, were unutterably better than what she had before her now. They were life.

And if at this hour Maggie had sunk insensible, and a policeman had borne her to the nearest station-house, and the commonest bodily attention had been shown her, probably by next morning all the darker dream of suicide would have passed away for ever. Instead of that good fortune I will tell you what befell her. A young girl threw up a ground-floor window, not many yards from where she sat, and then put herself at a piano, just where Maggie could catch a glimpse of her figure, and sang. It was not a region in which you would, ordinarily, expect to hear operatic airs; but here, as in all dull, airless city thoroughfares, some human beings were obliged to spend their lives, both winter and summer. This girl was the daughter of some poor clerk, or warehouse-keeper, perhaps; whose one vanity had been in the child's boarding-school education, whose one extravagance was the child's piano. At all events, she sang; and sang prettily; with a tuneful, touching voice, and modest grace; and the melody she chose was the one dear to the school-girl heart in every country of Europe—"*Robert, c'est toi que j'aime.*"

That song, so trite to the ear of civilization, was like a key-note to the one golden period of Maggie's life. In Paris, Mr Dennison had taken her, a three days' bride, to the opera; and Patti's voice had embodied for the English girl's ignorant heart all her yearning, voiceless passion for her own Robert. She never heard the song before or since, but its melody had at once sunk deep into her remembrance; and after the first few bars she knew it now. "*Robert, c'est toi que j'aime.*" Her husband had told her the meaning of the words, with tenderest looks, with furtive hand-pressure, then, and here—a forlorn outcast in the London streets—they came back to her.

"*Robert, Robert!*" She waited until the girl had sung the first verse of her song; then started up as if some living thing had stung her, and hurried on her road again.

Weak though she was, she had strength to get away quick from the exquisite pain that tune had the power to inflict upon her, and, in a minute or two, found herself by the water-side. She made her way down a long line of wharf, ever and anon stopping and

looking, with fascination rather than with horror, down into the river beneath; then suddenly raising her head, she saw that she was close beneath the dark, massive arches of a bridge—London Bridge she thought it must be, for Robert had taken her once to see the city, and she remembered that London Bridge lay in the position this did from St Paul's. It was now between nine and ten o'clock, and such wayfarers as darkness brings forth down by the river, were congregating thickly upon the pavement. But Maggie heeded none of them. Women stared at her, but she felt no shame; men spoke to her, and their words never reached her ears. She was insensible of the foul, tobacco-laden, spirit-charged atmosphere through which she had to struggle on. "*Robert, Robert!*" this was all she heard; this echo of the dead past was all from which she wanted to get away. She kept in the direction she had chosen as steadily as her fast-flagging strength would allow; in a few more minutes had nearly climbed the steps that lead from the water-side up to the bridge, and then felt that a fresher, colder, purer air was blowing upon her face.

The pavement on both sides of London Bridge was thronged with foot-passengers. One forlorn wretch like herself would never here, she felt, arrest the attention of any one: and so, after walking along a few paces irresolutely, she crept into the shadow of one of the recesses, and cowering down there, her head leaning against the wall, set herself to wait. Wait until she knew not what! until the crowd had lessened, or the lamps paled, or the last brightness of evening had died out of the sky! She suffered less now that she was quiet than she had done all day. Her head felt light and wandering, but not as it had done after she took the laudanum the night before. Now past things came back to her unmixed with any consciousness of the present. The house at Heathcotes, the plantation where she had first met "Mr Robert," her place in the village choir, where he could see her from the squire's pew: then her three weeks of Paris, and carriages and theatres: lastly, Robert's bachelor rooms, with the beautiful dinner-service, and the lace upon the toilet-table, and the fine lawn-covered pillow, and the perfumed cold hand that she had kissed! All came back to her, and painlessly. Misery, after a certain point, becomes its own anæsthetic. The recollections of life, the

prospects of death, were no longer more poignant to Maggie than they would be to a man under the influence of chloroform. Robert wanted her no longer; and she had come here to die; and it was good to rest in this dark corner, where no one could stare at her and guess her secret. . . .

This was about as much human emotion as it was now left to her to feel.

CHAPTER XII.

"YOU HAVE REJECTED ME."

THE Morteville public ball was advertised in the Morteville *Courant du Jour* for nine o'clock. It was an understood thing, however, that no persons of fashion appeared in the rooms until half-past nine at the earliest, and Mrs Lovell, ever a slave to conventionality, determined, too, not to look as if they wanted to get all they could for their money, had ordered the carriage—a crazy fiacre, bespoken a fortnight beforehand, so scarce were even crazy fiacres in Morteville—to be at their door at twenty-five minutes precisely before ten. Ten minutes going to the Etablissement would bring it to the quarter; they would then have five minutes to attend to their dresses in the cloak-room; and at ten minutes before ten would enter the ball-room. They could not be wrong, for the Sous-prefet's carriage was ordered at exactly the same hour, and the Maire's also.

But long before seven o'clock Archie Lovell was in her bedroom, not actually dressing—the putting on of her frock and wreath could scarcely by possibility be made to last out two hours—but lingering over all the fresh delicious details of this, her first ball toilet. Taking up her shoes (Mrs Lovell, by dint of heaven knows what household parsimony, had managed to purchase them for her), and making sure for the twentieth time that the rosettes were firmly sewed on; gazing at her gloves—she was afraid to do more than gaze at them, they were so delicate and white; hovering round the diaphanous cloud of white drapery that lay

upon her little bed; occasionally trying on her wreath with cautious fingers, and wondering whether it would look well a hair's-breadth higher or lower on her forehead; and finally leaning over and smelling a magnificent bouquet of white flowers that had been left for her by "un monsieur, mais un petit monsieur très très comme il faut," as Jeanneton said, in the course of the afternoon.

Most English girls have had the edge of enjoyment taken off their first real ball, by all the children's parties, and half grown-up parties, to which they have gone since they were babies. But no such premature dissipation had blunted Archie Lovell's keen instinct for pleasure. Dancing had come to her, as she told Mr Durant, by nature. All foreign servant-girls can dance; and from the time she could walk alone she had danced, after a fashion of her own, with her *bonnes;* also with the peasants, or with her father's artist-friends, at the out-of-door fêtes in Italy which it was Mr Lovell's special pleasure to attend. Inside a ball-room she had never been. She had never worn white gloves and shoes; had never had on a low dress; never seen an artificial flower closer than on the altar of the Catholic churches till now. And she stood and gazed at them all—all this paraphernalia of the order of womanhood with which she was about to be invested! with the same sort of reverence that a maiden knight of old might have felt while he watched his armour on the night before the *accolade.* When she looked down at the short linen dress and shabby shoes she had on, she almost pitied herself. How had she been happy so long while jasmine wreaths and white grenadines, satin shoes and snowy kid gloves, were worn by other girls and not by her? Would it be possible—the thought chilled her—to put on the linen dress and shabby shoes to-morrow morning, and go on with the old daily dull routine as usual? A strange sense of the mystery, the inequality of life, smote her as it had never done before. The white shoes and gloves would be dirty to-morrow, the dress soiled, the flowers withered, and Mr Durant gone. On this first night of August she was to taste the fulness of earthly enjoyment; to be dressed in a white dress six yards and a half in circumference; to go to a ball; to dance twenty-one dances, most of them with Mr Durant; not to return perhaps till daybreak; and then afterwards, for the rest of her existence—

"Archie, child, you will never enjoy the ball if you think of it so much beforehand," broke in her stepmother's voice at this point of her reverie. "Balls are doubtful pleasures at the best, and even if you move in the highest society—and it's likely indeed—you won't leave your seat twice. More than an hour you have been here, and now I find you looking at your dress still."

"But if I am not to enjoy the ball, Bettina, how lucky I can enjoy looking forward to it!" answered Archie, with unconscious philosophy. "If I don't leave my place once, nothing can take away the pleasure I have had in my imaginary successes. Now you, who are hopeless beforehand, and mean to be bored, according to your own account, when you get there, have not a single moment of compensation throughout the whole affair."

"Except when it is over," murmured Bettina, meekly. "At my age, and in our position, gaiety can never be anything to me but a cross, selfishly speaking. When I was your age, Archie, and in the very highest county society, perhaps I used to look forward to a ball as eagerly as you do, but now— Jeanneton, folle fille, que fais-tu avec ma robe?" she interrupted herself abruptly, as Jeanneton, bearing away her mistress's best dress from the kitchen, where it had been hanging by the fire, passed before Archie's door. "Prenez garde de ces grosses pieds de votre!"—Mrs Lovell's French was still imperfect—"and tenez the chandelle droit. Archie, tell that idiotic woman in French to mind the grease. I wouldn't have a spot on my mauve moiré for all I'm worth."

This mauve moiré was the dress Miss Curtis had worn on the day she led Mr Lovell to the altar. At that date it was termed violet; but when the word mauve came into fashion Mrs Lovell called it mauve: and almost made Archie, who was simple then, believe, on the strength of the change, that it was a new dress. To bring it down to an approximate fashionable length, velvet of a suitable colour had been added from time to time round the skirt; but for the bodice alteration was impossible, dresses having been cut at the time of Miss Curtis's wedding with considerably tighter bodies and sleeves than a modern riding-habit. On all great festivities Mrs Lovell wore the mauve moiré, hanging it for a day beforehand by the fire, with faith in this process taking out creases and making it equal to new. She wore, in addition, on the pre-

sent occasion a white lace shawl and a pair of black satin shoes, all descended from the wedding; a garnet necklace and earrings, and lappets of real point on her head. Archie had often been accorded glances at these treasures one by one and with solemn mystery, by her stepmother. She had never so much as imagined the possibility of their being brought out before the eyes of men all at once; and when, after a lengthened absence, the two women met, dressed, in the little salon, her admiration for Bettina knew no bounds.

"In our different styles we shall be the two best-dressed women in the room, Bettina, depend upon it!" she cried, with all a child's belief in everything and every one belonging to herself. "Your dress is perfect, now, perfect—and I don't mind saying so! Papa," appealingly to Mr Lovell, who had come in, and was literally feasting his eyes on her—on his child, I mean, not his wife. "Isn't Bettina looking nice? Isn't the effect of the white lace over the mauve really beautiful?"

"Beautiful!" echoed Mr Lovell, absently, and never taking his eyes from the girl's face, "beautiful! and so like. I never knew how like till now. You see it, Bettina?" after a moment's pause. "Nay, nay—how should you? Your gown looks very well, my dear,"—he had not called her "my dear" three times since their marriage—"and you have dressed the child admirably. I wish little Taroni were here to make a sketch of her."

"Indeed, I think little Taroni made quite sketches enough of me," cried Archie, petulantly, and dancing away to take another look at herself in the glass. "For once, papa, don't think of me as a model. To-night I am neither peasant, nymph, contadina, nor any other atelier lay-figure, but a human being; and, which is more, a young lady. I can hardly believe it of myself though, yet."

But although she disclaimed her father's compliment, Miss Lovell might in good truth have stood for a model at that moment—a model of Diana, of Hebe, of any impersonation in whose beauty youth, health, and freshness are supreme. Her evening dress revealed a neck and arms not dazzlingly white, but of a fresh wax-like texture, and exceedingly shapely; a neck and arms with no Juno-like proportions, for plumpness and dimples are not ex-

actly what the mind connects with the imperial goddess, but girlish and graceful. Her hair, unbound, fell in silken plenty over her shoulders and far beneath her slender waist. A little round jasmine wreath was set coquettishly on one side of her head, and admirably suited her mignonne, sparkling face. No necklace round her throat; no bracelets on her arms. The white dress—the little wreath—the natural flowers in her hand—were her sole adornments. She looked like what she was—a child playing for the first time at being grown up; and a certain something not unfeminine, but unconventional, in her brusque way of jumping about in her fashionable skirts, heightened the suspicion that to be iron-clad and trained was a discipline to which time as yet had not accustomed her.

"Enjoy yourself, child," said Mr Lovell, as at twenty minutes to ten he put her and Bettina into the carriage. "Show me your silk shoes quite worn out to-morrow morning." And then he stood, and by the dim light from the solitary lamp of the Rue d'Artois, watched the fiacre that bore her from his sight. Watched with the first vague jealousy of Archie he had ever known; the jealousy every father living, however generous, however manly, must, I think, have felt at times for the child who is a child no more; the jealousy which makes the last chapters of Jean Valjean's life so touching a poem. Archie was his little one no longer. He thought of the old Dresden days, when he used to walk with her in his arms about the market in the early summer mornings. He thought of the broken patois of her baby voice, of the determined clasp of her baby hands; and with a choking feeling at his breast went back to his study—to write something about Archie, or about the feelings of some other father at first seeing his girl a woman? No. If Frederick Lovell had ever described any of the common things he himself felt or did, he might have been a poet. He went to pile up scores of inflated images about florid sunsets over meridian plains—the like of which he had never experienced, and which, consequently, could never interest any other mortal being to read of.

Meanwhile, Archie and Mrs Lovell arrived safely at the Etablissement, and after an interval—a breathless interval to Archie—of disrobing, made their way to the dancing-room. Was the Maire

there? the Sous-prefet? Mr Durant himself? For a good many minutes Archie knew and saw nothing. A mist gathered before her eyes; her limbs felt heavy; in spite of all her efforts, she knew that her lips trembled as she walked along.

"Don't be shy, child. No one is looking at us or thinking of us," Bettina whispered to reassure her, and Archie answered, quite sincerely, that she was never less shy in her life. All she felt was delight, "and—and anxiety for a partner, Bettina," she added. "I shall never get over the shame if I sit out the first dance."

She was for walking up and down the room, and so giving any male acquaintance who might be there a chance of coming up and inviting her to dance; but Mrs Lovell, better versed in propriety, insisted upon sitting down at once. All the seats in the best position of the room were already filled, and so they had to take their places not far from the door, and somewhat hidden from general view by one of the pillars of the colonnade that ran round the room. Archie could have cried as she sat down. Once planted in this odious place, probably none of the young men would think of asking her to dance at all. The band struck up a waltz, and she watched men asking other girls to dance, and then, tra-la-la, tra-la-la, off they floated in a delicious melodious whirl that made her heart positively ache as she sat there, excluded from its mazes. Just at that moment little Monsieur Gounod, one of the partners upon whom she had depended, appeared through the doorway, resplendent; his boots shining like looking-glass, his fierce moustache waxed and twisted up nearly to his eyes, a turned-down collar to show his throat, and a gorgeous expanse of open-work shirt, with pink silk gleaming underneath: very nice, indeed, Archie thought Monsieur Gounod looked. And, instead of coming up to her, he went off straight to Madame the Maire—horrid little time-serving, fawning man—and madame, in spite of her forty years and her stalwart waist, smiled and bowed and attitudinized her assent, and then these two went off, tra-la-la, tra-la-la, like the rest; and Archie Lovell remained sitting still.

Would she have a better chance by standing up? When the interminable waltz was ended, and people were beginning to engage their partners for the next dance, a quadrille, Archie made

this suggestion to Bettina, who, a great deal happier than her stepdaughter, was just then counting, with intense interest, the number of gores in Madame the Sous-prefet's skirt. "Stand up?" yes, certainly; there would be no impropriety in standing up for a minute or two. As to talking of a "better chance," it was absurd even to expect to dance yet. Not until all the ladies of consequence had danced, ought Archie to dream of a partner. And then Bettina fell, with vital eagerness, again to the measurement of Madame the Sous-prefet. If, as she believed, there were ten gores in her dress, it could have been made with fourteen yards; and that arch-traitress Annette, the work-girl, had declared that, to her own certain knowledge, Madame the Sous-prefet always had sixteen yards in every dress she wore. Women like Mrs Lovell, I verily believe, enjoy a ball-room most. To young women it is an arena; they are the actors, the matadors and the picadors in the fight. The vicissitudes of success and defeat have all to be borne by them—and with smiling faces! The women who neither hope nor fear for themselves are the calm spectators; and they derive edification—unintelligible to women under thirty, and to men of all ages, as the raptures of Spaniards at a bullfight are to the people of other countries—from every minute detail of the conflict before their eyes. Ten gores in the skirt? Yes, Annette must be an impostor; for she said no dress could be made with an even number. And the front width just touching the ground; not ridiculously short, half way up to the knees, as Annette declared was the last Paris fashion! When Madame waltzed again, she would be able to see if the dress was lined—another point on which she had the gravest suspicions as regarded Annette. And all this time Archie's heart was beating so loud she thought it must be heard, and her cheeks were flushing, and her poor little teeth were set hard, to keep her mouth from trembling at the thought that another dance would begin and find her without a partner.

However, standing up brought about better fortune after all. Just as the sets were forming, and as Bettina whispered that it was undignified to keep any longer on her feet, up came young Willy Montacute—the third string of Archie's bow—and asked her to dance. Young Montacute was very young indeed, and very shy, and very plain to look upon—never mind, he was a

partner, and Archie went away with him joyously. She was the more delighted to have secured him when, a minute later, there resounded that peculiar ostentatious rustling of silk, which only the movements of very under-bred English persons seem capable of creating, and the great Mrs O'Rourke, with old Maloney and suite, bridled and languished into the room. For worlds Miss Lovell would not have been found sitting out, partnerless, by her enemies; and she felt quite grateful to Willy Montacute for having asked her, and smiled at him, and chattered to him, and danced pretty little steps of her own to the quadrille-music; and only now and then looked eagerly to the door, whenever any new face appeared there, in the hope that it might be Mr Durant himself come at last to dance with her!

When the quadrille was over, her partner asked her if she would take any refreshment. She was a great deal too much excited to require bodily sustenance, and was desperately afraid of touching anything that could take the freshness from her gloves before Mr Durant had seen them. However, any risk would be better, she thought, than going back to her place by Bettina; so she said "yes," and went with Master Montacute to the refreshment or ante-room, where they pretended to flirt, as they regaled themselves on two glasses of sugar-and-water. Then they came back to the ball-room, and Willy Montacute inquired if he should take her to her place. "I'd like to ask you to dance this galop with me," he remarked, as Archie rather faintly assented, "only I dance so vilely, I don't like to try with any one but my sisters."

"Oh, I dare say we should get on very well," said the girl, readily. "I'm not much of a dancer myself—I mean not much of a ball-room dancer—but I used to waltz a great deal out of doors, with different people in Italy, and I generally managed to get on pretty well with all of them."

Thus encouraged, young Master Montacute put his arm round her waist, and after one or two false starts, they got off. The youth had underrated his own powers; he was by no means the worst style of bad dancer—having good wind, a tall figure, and just address enough to tread on the feet of other people, not of his partner. What he really wanted were nerve, firmness, and pluck; and conscious of these deficiencies, he went at a pace, when once

off, that defied honest competition. If he slackened, he felt he might break down; if he stopped, that he might not make so good a start again.

"You are not tired? You don't want to stop?" he gasped occasionally, as they fled along; and Archie, too breathless to speak, told him each time, by a nod or shake of her head, that the pace pleased her. Not till the music ceased did they stop; and by this time Miss Lovell's cheeks were like damask roses, and her blue eyes were full of light, and her long hair was all tossed about—some of it clinging, indeed, around young Montacute's arm—and her jasmine wreath, which had fallen off in the course of one of their false starts, was hanging over her arm.

"Just like a Bacchante," Mrs Maloney, who was standing near, pronounced her to be; hiding away her own modest old eyes behind her fan the while, for fear of contamination.

The rooms were now filling fast; and as Archie Lovell walked along, her singular beauty began to attract universal attention. She knew it, and with delicious flutter, said to her heart that she would not have to sit out many more dances that night; and she was right.

Just as young Montacute was leading her back to the corner where Bettina sat, a gentleman came up, his opera-hat under his arm, and with a profound bow, asked Miss Lovell, in excellent English, to allow him to put down his name upon her card. He was a young Russian prince at present staying in Morteville (and coveted as a partner by every woman in the room), and Archie's face flushed up with delight.

"I shall be very glad, indeed, to dance with you, but I have no card. There have only been two dances yet, and I danced both with the same partner."

Willy Montacute volunteered at once, proud even of this vicarious relation with aristocracy, to get her a card; and while he was gone Miss Lovell stood and chatted with great unconcern to the young Russian. If she had gone through half-a-dozen London seasons, she could not have looked and felt more entirely at her ease than she did at this moment; the boldness of a child taking, in her, the place of acquired and conventional courage. Shaking her hair back across her shoulders, with her face upturned, her

head, as her trick was, a little on one side, she stood quietly talking to the prince, as if she had been used to talk to princes all her life; isolated, as it chanced, for the moment, from any other group; with no fan to flutter—women's usual stay on such emergencies—and her bouquet calmly held and never raised, as an embarrassed woman must have raised it, for one instant to her face.

As she stood thus, Gerald Durant entered the ball-room. He had expected to see Miss Lovell looking pretty—in a somewhat school-girl style of prettiness; ill-dressed probably, as women in the provinces invariably are, dancing violently with some young member of the Morteville bourgeoisie. He saw her a vision, with bright falling hair, with radiant eyes; dressed in as faultless taste as though Elise had been her milliner; and with the handsomest and best-born man in the room at her side. How well pleased she looked at this miserable little foreign nobleman's attentions! How she showed her white teeth, and shook back her tawny locks, and turned her head aside, or shot glances at him from her blue eyes, just as she had done the day before at Mr Durant himself! When young Montacute brought the card, the Prince took it from Archie's hand and wrote his name down for several dances—and as he asked for each, Miss Lovell smiled and gave a pleased nod of her head. If Gerald had only played at being in love with her before, he felt strongly that it would be play no longer now. They had met on equal ground at length. Archie was a woman to be won, not a child to be played with; and there was a rival worthy of the effort to be distanced. The fairest woman living would scarcely have been worthy the trouble of winning to Mr Durant without that.

He moved away among the crowd, so that Archie did not see him; and when she had returned to Mrs Lovell, he stood close beside her chair before she knew that he was in the room.

"Miss Wilson, I suppose there is no use in my asking you to dance?"

Archie, in the seventh heaven of delight, was just showing Bettina her card with the Prince's hieroglyph written no less than four times upon it. "I don't know how to pronounce his name, Bettina! There are two zz's, you see, and a double f, and a capital C, and no vowels to speak of; however, that doesn't matter—

he is a prince. I don't care what else happens how. Yes, Bettina, my wreath fell off, and you may keep it," throwing it down in her stepmother's lap. "I was without a wreath when *he* asked me to dance, and I am content!" She was just in the middle of her triumph, and of this somewhat heartless speech, when Gerald's soft caressing voice—so unlike the Prince's little piping falsetto—interrupted her.

"Mr Durant, I never knew you were here! I shall be delighted." And she jumped up, not doubting for a moment that he meant to ask her for the next dance, and took his arm.

"I hardly thought I had a chance," he remarked, as he led her away through the crowd. "When I came in and saw you giving all those dances to that Russian fellow, I never expected that I should get a single waltz. Confess you had forgotten me, and the dances we were to have had, until I came up and asked you."

"Indeed I had not," answered Miss Lovell, feeling, guiltily, at the same time, how nearly he had guessed the truth; "I had been wondering—oh, wondering whether you would ever come all the evening! I mean ever since I have been here."

"You have danced every time, of course?"

"Yes." How thankful she felt he had not seen her whirling with Willy Montacute! With her hand on Gerald Durant's arm, and with the Prince's name written four times over on her card, how miserable seemed her little triumph with poor Willy!—how resolved she was to ignore him for the remainder of the night, and of her life! "I have danced, but I did not enjoy the dances much," she added, demurely.

"They were not with the Russian, then?"

"No. His are all to come."

"I see. Miss Wilson, you have the rare virtue of sincerity."

They had now reached the inner or dancing space of the room, and Archie, a great deal more keen for waltzing than for sentimental flirtation, quitted Mr Durant's arm at once, and gathered her muslin skirts a little together with her right hand. She had come to the ball to dance twenty-one dances, and had no idea of losing unnecessary time.

"Shall we really go through it?" suggested Gerald, who had the natural prejudices of a bored Guardsman of five-and-twenty

against round dances. "I see a room looking delightfully cool and empty away to the right. I mean, don't you think by-and-by we shall find it less crowded for dancing?" he added, in answer to the blank surprise of Archie's face.

"By-and-by? Yes, I dare say we shall; but why lose a waltz now? Surely in London you dance in greater crowds than this?"

The disappointment of her look and tone was unmistakable. Mr Durant saw that any man who aspired to Miss Lovell's favour must make up his mind to dance himself thereinto; and he heroically resolved to waltz, as he had said to Dennison, like a student, for the remainder of the night.

"I'm so fond of dancing, and it's such a treat to me," she pleaded, as she rested her little hand upon his arm. "You must remember this is the first ball I have ever been at in my life, and you are my second partner. It's very different for you who have been having nothing but balls and pleasure all your life."

She need not have apologized. Before they had gone half round the room, Gerald felt that he was enjoying this waltz as he had not enjoyed any dance for years. The floor was first-rate, the room not over-crowded, and his partner—perfection! He had danced in his time with excellent dancers of all nations and of all classes; but this little girl suited him better than all. There was something contagious in her own irrepressible enjoyment; in the verve, the buoyancy with which she moved. In London drawing-rooms, and at Mabille, at the Tuileries, and the Staffordshire county balls, the same feeling of non-amusement had been ever wont to oppress him. Young women might be beautiful, or excellent dancers, or sought in vain by other people; Gerald had invariably had the same feeling while he danced with them—that a quiet flirtation in some dim-lighted conservatory would be better. But Archie's was the very poetry of waltzing; her flowing hair, her happy parted lips, her grace, her *abandon*, divided her from every other woman with whom he had danced in all his life before. In a waltz, as in everything else, the girl's most potent charm for Gerald Durant was in this—her individuality. He had known women in classes hitherto, and each class, in turn, had bored him. In Archie, for the first time, he saw a girl who could divert him for any number of hours with her merry tongue;

who would let him smoke as he talked to her in the moonlight; who would dance as she was dancing now, answering with a merry smile every little bit of nonsense he whispered, and still who was as removed as Lucia herself from the very detestation of his heart—fastness. No grisette could be more amusing than this child; no countess more refined. And then her heart was as pure as her face! Gerald Durant held no more exalted opinions of human nature than most men hold, to whom a plentiful supply of money and a commission in the Guards have been given at nineteen; but this virtue may be put to his credit—he believed in women whenever he met with one worthy of belief. And Archie's charm for him—the charm that was the key-stone to the rest, and without which she would not have been Archie, but one of a class—was her innocence. Smoking beside her in the moonlight, or here with his arm around her waist in a crowded ball-room, it was the same. There was always something cold in those blue eyes; some girlish mocking ring in the little laugh; some lingering bloom of childhood on the red lips, that held him, as it were, very far away from her. Charm without a name! Charm that if Rachel or Breidenbach could only distil, and label "Dew of the morning," or "Maiden Blush," and sell at five guineas a packet, would fill their shops with fashionable ladies, I imagine, from morning till night.

When the waltz was over, Archie had the honour of dancing a quadrille with the Prince, and very insipid she found him after Gerald. No well-bred Russian or Frenchman is ever anything but insipid to an unmarried girl. Still, he was a prince, and Miss Lovell, for vanity's sake, enjoyed this quadrille exceedingly. Were not Mrs O'Rourke, and the Maloney, and poor Miss Marks, partnerless, looking on with wide-open eyes? Was not little Monsieur Gounod, from his distant bourgeois set, trying hard to attract her attention? Was not Bettina standing on tiptoe, and nodding encouragement to her from afar? Was not Gerald Durant—here lay the gist of the whole triumph—standing near in a doorway, speaking to no one, and watching her intently? When the dance was over, and she had walked round the rooms on the Prince's arm, then stood in a conspicuous position eating an ice, while he waited deferentially upon her and held her bouquet,

Archie wondered in her heart whether life *could* ever bring back any happiness so intense as this? Every one who passed glancing at her with admiration—Monsieur the Prince humbly holding her flowers—Mr Durant still watching her from the doorway—Mr Durant's name written, too many times to count, upon her card! Could happiness like this be repeated often, and was—sudden as light flashed this thought upon her—was the feeling she had toward Mr Durant, or the Prince, anything resembling love? If so, love was a very charming thing. If this fairy-scene of light and flowers; these attentive, handsome partners, in their primrose gloves and silk-faced coats; if this new, intoxicating sense of her own beauty were all, indeed, the inauguration of the great romance of life, how much better that romance was than she had imagined! Ivanhoe at the feet of Rowena, Clive Newcome claiming Ethel at last, were situations that had hitherto touched her deeply. But how pale and prosaic were they compared with this! She was certain Rowena never felt to Ivanhoe as she did to Mr Durant—no, the Prince—Mr Durant—which in the world was it? Ethel Newcome's love was very well in its way, but Ethel Newcome went through dull, long years, away from Clive, and gave up the world, and took to school-teaching and district-visiting—while she—she would never give up the world or take to anything but balls, and pleasure, and beautiful dresses. She would marry one of her slaves, the Prince probably—and have a white silk and diamonds, and a pink silk and pearls, and she would give three balls a week, and go out to three, and let poor Mr Durant be the first on her list of partners sometimes, and—

"Mademoiselle, will you accord me a dance?" said little Monsieur Gounod, obsequiously, at her elbow, just as the Prince was putting down her plate. "Mademoiselle has been so surrounded, I could not approach her sooner."

Dancing with Monsieur Gounod was rather a descent from being a princess, and entertaining in silks and diamonds three times a week; but remembering that there might be future Morteville balls without princes, and without Mr Durant, Archie graciously gave him a dance very low down on her card (she smiled at the notion of Monsieur Adolphe Gounod's petitioning her for dances, and her condescending to give him one); and then Monsieur the Prince

handed her back, through the discomfited, neglected host of O'Rourke and Maloney, to Bettina's side.

That enchanting evening waned at last; alike for Archie as for the plainest, most unnoticed woman there, or for poor Bettina—every gore in every dress in the room exhausted—asleep in her chair. Miss Lovell had danced her four dances with the Prince, and knew now that she would never marry him; also that his well-cut coat, and perfect gloves, and high-bred manner, were his greatest charms. And she had danced with other young and well-looking partners, and knew that she cared for none of them as she did for Mr Durant. How much was it that she cared for him? She asked herself this quite late in the evening, as they stood together, her hand resting on his arm, and a sudden, odd, choked feeling in her throat was her answer. She liked him, for certain, more than she had ever liked any man, save one; and that was years ago—a child's liking merely. Liked him, as in this wandering, vagabond life of theirs, it was scarcely possible she would like any one again. With a sudden revulsion of feeling she felt that she hated all foreigners, princes included; hated artists; hated the men her lot would and must lie among. What she should like would be an English home among English people; the world that was Gerald's world; the country that was his country. Was this love, or approaching love? She knew not. But Gerald knew there was a softer look than he had ever seen in her blue eyes; a tremble in her voice whenever she spoke of the coming day—nay, the day that had already come and must divide them.

"Let us leave off dancing now," he whispered to her. "We will return and have the last dance of all together; but let us rest a little now. There are people walking outside on the terrace; and the moon makes it as light as day. Let us go too."

They went out together on the broad gravel promenade, a plateau that divides the Etablissement at Morteville from the shore, and walked at once to the end furthest from the ball-room. It was high tide; and the calm glassy sea broke in monotonous cadence on the sands. In the extreme west the waning yellow moon lay close to the horizon; the sky was white with stars above their head.

"What a glorious sky!" cried Archie; and, all involuntarily, her hand rested heavier on his arm. "Mr Durant, when you are in London, I wonder whether you will look back, and think of to-night?"

From any woman but Archie the speech would have been a leading one; and Gerald forgot that it was Archie who spoke, and in a second had carried her little gloved hand to his lips. "I shall never forget to-night, Miss Wilson—never while I live. As to my return to England," he added, tenderly, "there is no occasion for me to go there at all, unless you bid me do so."

She caught her hand away from him; her heart beat violently; a scorching blush rose into her face. A minute ago she liked Gerald so that she could have cried to say good-bye to him; now she very nearly hated him. What right had he to kiss her hand—her hand that no man's lips but her father's had ever touched? What right had he to bend his head down so close to her? "I—I don't know what you mean, Mr Durant. How can it depend upon me whether you go or stay?" And as she spoke she took off her glove—the glove Gerald had kissed—and laid it down upon the little stone wall that formed the boundary of the terrace.

At this moment she might have been an excuse for any folly, any madness—with the moonlight turning her mass of waving hair to bronze, and whitening into snow the soft outline of her girlish throat and arms. A wild desire came upon Gerald to snatch her to his breast, then and there to give up Lucia, and content himself, beggared, for the rest of his life with being the master and ruler of that face and of those blue eyes that were gleaming at him with so very little of subjection in their expression now.

"I have offended you," he exclaimed, quickly. "Miss Wilson, tell me at least that I have not offended you hopelessly?"

"Offended! No, Mr Durant; that is not the word." But she kept well away from him as she answered. "You have only surprised me. If it had been that Russian Prince or Monsieur Gounod I should have cared less. All foreigners make ridiculous speeches, I believe, and kiss ladies' hands, and perform such antics. But you—an Englishman! No; I did not expect it."

"Antics? A man carried away by an impulse too strong for

him kisses a hand—a gloved hand!—like yours; and you call his impulse an antic?"

"I do," with a burst of sudden passion, "unless—unless, of course, he cares about her!" her voice changing as Gerald had once before heard it change, when she approached the subject of love.

"And if he did care for her?"

"Ah! I know nothing about that. I mean—I mean—" and then she turned her face quite away from him, and was silent.

Gerald was at her side in a moment. "Archie," he cried, "I do care for you! I would give my life for you! Will you accept it?"

He stood for a minute, not trying even to take her hand again. Then Archie turned. Mr Durant could see her face full in the moonlight, and he knew that it looked less like a child's face than it had ever looked before. Her eyes were downcast; a little nervous tremble was about her lips.

"Mr Durant, how am I to take this?" she asked.

A dozen Belgravian mothers in conclave could not have decided upon a better question than this, which Archie's untutored instinct taught her.

"To—to take it!" repeated Gerald, but not without hesitation. "Miss Wilson—Archie—can there be any way but one in which to interpret my admiration—my devotion?"

Admiration, devotion, fine words, but that fell with a blank sound on Archie Lovell's ear. She was very young, she was thoroughly unhackneyed; but every warm affection, every strong, honest, natural feeling lay dormant in that childish heart. Gerald's kiss shocked her by its abruptness, and for a moment she had felt outraged, frightened; then, when he pleaded with her, when he said, tenderly, "I do care for you; I would give my life for you," her heart seemed all at once to stir with a violent pulsation, and she had stood irresolute (that was when he watched her lips tremble), simply waiting with a sort of fear for his next words, and for whatever new emotion should master her.

"How am I to take this?" she asked mechanically, as she waited thus; and then Mr Durant broke forth about admiration and devotion, and for him Archie Lovell's heart never beat as it

had beat in that one loud stroke again. By a hair's breadth only had she escaped loving him. But she had escaped it. The first false ring of his voice, the first stereotyped words of flattery, had saved her; and she was unconscious, both now and hereafter, what danger this was that she had run.

"I interpret your admiration and devotion thus, Mr Durant. Here, in Morteville, an uncivilized sort of girl, called Archie Wilson, has made your time pass pleasantly to you. I know very well I have done that; and when you get back to England you will think of her—well, kindly always, I hope; but with about as much pain as Archie will think of you. *Voilà!* Let us be friends. You wanted to see how much my head was really turned by all it has had put in it to-night. Have you a cigar? You may smoke it if you have." And with a little spring she perched herself on the wall, in the careless attitude in which Gerald had seen her on the day of their first meeting.

"And your glove, Miss Wilson? Is it to remain here? You don't want to touch it again, I suppose."

"I don't want to put it on," said Archie, carelessly. "I can dance the last waltz very well without it, can't I?"

"Oh, quite well," said Gerald, bitterly; "or, if you choose, the dance can be given up. Anything rather than that you should be reminded of my folly." And he took up the glove (warm still, and bearing the print of her little hand) and tossed it into the next wave that broke upon the sand. He, Gerald Durant, the courteous, the débonnaire, had actually lost his temper, for almost the only time in his life, with a woman.

The first thought that crossed Archie's mind was regret for the glove. Bettina had given four francs the pair for them, saying that if you got the best they would wear for two balls at least, and clean afterwards. She had meant to be cold, dignified, when she took the glove off and laid it down, to purify it as it were from Mr Durant's kiss; but she had never meant ultimately to abandon a piece of property worth two francs. This was how the ball she had enjoyed so intensely was to end! She and Gerald were fast becoming enemies. She could hear the notes of the last waltz already, and instead of dancing it, they were quarrelling

here; and then, as a pleasant finish to it all, she would have to drive home and be scolded by Bettina for having lost her glove.

"And so you don't even care to dance with me again?" she said, after a minute, and turning her face to Gerald. She was too proud directly to allude to the loss of her glove. "So much for your devotion, Mr Durant; it has not lasted long."

"You have rejected me, Miss Wilson."

"I rejected your fine speeches, not you. You know it."

He did; he knew that they had only been fine speeches; that he had meant to flirt desperately with poor little Archie; not to marry her; and that her delicate woman's instinct, not any worldly knowledge whatever, had made her value his declaration at its exact worth. Could he be angry with her long? Was she not, in truth, too good to be trifled with? Should he mar the remembrance of their brief acquaintance by parting from her in bitterness? And did not the tears that glistened in the poor child's eyes even now tell him that at her heart, and in her simple way, she cared for him still?

"In spite of your cruelty to me, I shall always feel the same towards you, Miss Wilson. You may be very sure of that."

"And we will dance the last dance together, then, after all?"

"Of course we will, if you will only forgive me first. I shall be too utterly miserable, Archie, unless you forgive me!"

She not only forgave him, but held her hand to him in token of forgiveness; and then they returned slowly along the terrace to the ball-room. Just as they got to the entrance-door, Miss Lovell drew back, and hesitated. "It looks strange, does it not, to dance with only one glove on? How would it be, do you think, to take off the other too? Better, eh?"

"Yes, certainly better," said Gerald, "and as it will be quite useless to you, you may make it a present to me. I shall like to have something that was worn by you to-night."

She took off her glove, touched in her inmost heart by his wish to possess it, and gave it him without a word. Gerald folded it reverently, put it in his breast-pocket (he has that little faded glove still—the only love relic kept from his youth), and then they went into the ball-room. It was almost cleared now, the band

was playing the "Faust Waltzes" deliciously—the bright moonlight, streaming in through the open doors and windows, made the lamps pale as though it had been broad day.

"It was too good to last," said Gerald, as the last notes died away, and while Archie's hand still rested on his shoulder. "For the first time in my life, I have found a ball too short."

"And I, too," said Archie, "I think I should have liked that waltz to last for ever—except for Bettina."

On their way home Bettina made inquiries as to her satin shoes.

"In ribbons," answered Archie, laconically, and holding up a tiny ragged foot for her stepmother's inspection. "So much for Monsieur Joubert and his fifteen francs."

"And your gloves?"

"Lost."

"Archie—lost!"

"One of them fell in the sea, and one of my partners has the other. Oh, Bettina, don't scold," she cried, as Mrs Lovell was about to exclaim. "Better one ball like this, and my shoes in rags, and my gloves gone, than fifty stupid ones, and all my clothes in correct order. It was a heavenly ball, Bettina."

"It has been a very expensive one," said Mrs Lovell, reckoning up on her fingers; "fifteen francs the shoes; four the gloves; three the carriage—twenty-two francs, not counting the dress and wreath, which, of course, will come in again. It's no good talking of expense, certainly, now that the folly has been committed; but there's one thing, Archie, I must say to you to-night, sleepy though I am."

"What is it?" cried the girl, turning hot and then cold in a minute, and not knowing which of her own shortcomings was to be brought to light.

"Well, Archie, it isn't perhaps a moral delinquency; but after reposing confidence for eighteen months in a young woman, to find out that she is an impostor is not pleasant. Annette has told me a tissue of falsehoods from beginning to end. Fourteen yards of silk would make as handsome a dress as any in that room—and the Sous-prefet's wife had ten gores in her skirt. I said so from the first."

CHAPTER XIII.

ON THE PIER.

When Archie woke the next morning it seemed to her that she had aged by twenty years since yesterday. She had been a child then—she was a woman now; had worn a ball-dress and white satin shoes; and danced with a prince, and with Mr Durant, and had had Monsieur Gounod, and a dozen other little Frenchmen, at her feet. Was she better for the change? For the first five minutes of waking, certainly not. There was a heavy weight above her eyes, and her mouth felt parched, and a listless, weary sensation in all her frame, for the first time in her life, made her disinclined to move. She lay quiet for a few minutes, thinking over every detail of the ball—wondering a little, too, whether she was so very much happier for having gone to it; then suddenly recollected that she must get up and dress at once if she wished to be in time to see her father, who was going off with Bettina to Amiens by the eleven o'clock train. And half an hour later, fresh from her cold bath, and with her wet hair hanging over her shoulders, and her linen frock and her sailor's hat on, Archie, running from room to room, singing and laughing, and calling to Jeanneton for a "tartine" to eat by way of breakfast on her road to the station, was Archie again.

The Lovells' visit to Amiens had been planned for some weeks past. Mr Lovell, wanting to attend a sale of *bric-à-brac* that was to take place on this and the following day, and poor Bettina, for very economy's sake, determining to attend him. To prevent his bidding hundreds of francs for things that looked to her like rubbish was beyond her power; indeed, experience had taught her recently that these were the solitary transactions in life wherein Mr Lovell did not fail, several of his later purchases of the kind having fetched double and treble their cost afterwards in Paris. But she could keep him straight in his domestic expenses. Without her he would go to the dearest hotel in the place (this morning's post had unfortunately brought him a quarter's remittance), ask any horrible Jew, or artist, or creature who took his fancy at

the sale, back to dinner, and regale him with as much chablis or champagne as he chose to swallow. With her he would be conducted to the mildly hospitable and rigidly dull roof of a certain Madame Bonnechose, wife of the Protestant pastor of Amiens, to whom Mrs Lovell had once shown attention in Morteville. And poor Mr Lovell, as biddable and sweet-tempered as a child in anything that merely involved his own personal discomfort, had meekly succumbed to the arrangement.

"But I wish you were coming too, Archie," he said to his daughter, as she was standing on the platform waiting to see the train bear them out of the Morteville station. Mr and Mrs Bonnechose are admirable people, Bettina says, but I should enjoy their society much more if you were with me. Take care of yourself without us, little one."

"And look after Jeanneton," cried Bettina, putting her head out of the window after the train had moved. "Mind about the keys—and be sure to lock up everything by eight, and, Archie, if she wants to go out—" But here her voice was lost in a prolonged and deafening shriek from the engine, and Archie could only nod and look ferociously determined, and otherwise express by pantomime, her determination to keep jealous watch and ward over Jeanneton till Bettina's return.

She strolled back to the Rue d'Artois, thinking how slowly the time would pass till two o'clock, when she had promised—no, when she had told—Mr Durant she might possibly be walking on the pier just at the time the steamer he was going by should start. For she had confided to him all about the old people's Amiens expedition, and Gerald, instead of crossing to Folkestone by the mail, had at once decided on waiting for an excursion-boat that was to go direct from Morteville to London that afternoon. When she got into the house, the first thing she saw was Jeanneton clearing away the breakfast things, and crying in showy theatrical manner, as French servants do cry when they intend that you should notice their grief. Miss Lovell laughed aloud at once. Jeanneton's sorrows were well known to the household; they all arose from the ill-conduct of a certain Pierre, real or fabulous, with whom this young woman asserted herself to be sentimentally in love.

"What have you the matter with you now, Jeanneton? What new perfidy has Pierre been committing?"

"Ah, mademoiselle," wiping her eyes unceremoniously on the breakfast-cloth, "it's very well for mademoiselle to laugh. Mademoiselle has her balls, and her toilets, and her pleasures for herself, while a poor girl like me—and it would have made no difference to madame; and to-day is his fête, and only two leagues from Morteville, and the tante is as active as a sparrow, and clean, but of a cleanness!"

Which, being interpreted, signified that Jeanneton had wanted four-and-twenty hours of leave to attend her lover's fête in her native village; that she had an aunt, active as a sparrow, willing to come and take her place in the kitchen, and that Bettina had thrown cold water on the whole scheme. As she wept and argued, and grew eloquent about "Pierre," Archie really began to believe in his existence, and to think that Bettina had been cruel. What harm would there be in her letting the girl go? "If you would be sure to be back before papa and madame, Jeanneton, I don't see why you mightn't go. There's food enough in the larder for me till to-morrow, I suppose."

"Ah, and if there is not the tante would go to market," Jeanneton broke forth; "the tante would get mademoiselle a delicious chicken, the tante—"

"Shall do nothing at all for me, Jeanneton, you may be sure," interrupted Archie, imperatively. "You may go, if you choose, but I'll have no horrible old tantes, chattering till I'm wild, and breaking every cup and saucer we possess. And whatever you do, make up your mind about it quickly," she added. "I'm going for a walk myself at two o'clock, and if you choose to go I can take the door-key in my pocket."

Jeanneton made a feeble show of regret at leaving her young mistress all night alone; then consoled herself with the remembrance that the porter's wife was close at hand, and could be called whenever mademoiselle wished; and finally, half an hour later walked off out of the house, in the very highest spirits, and in her holiday clothes. The pretty Morteville cap jauntily set on her smooth jet hair, a pair of silver rings, nearly as large as fine ladies wear them now in London, in her ears, a crucifix on her

throat, and her prayer-book neatly folded in a checked handkerchief in her hand. Not that she was going to attend the offices, but because a prayer-book was her insignia of full dress, without which she would have been no more complete than a young lady, even on days when there is neither rain nor sun, without her white parasol.

It was a quarter to one now; the excursion-steamer was advertised to leave the Morteville Roads at two; and Miss Lovell thought that, if she walked slowly, she would not be much too early if she got ready at once. How should she dress? She did not like to put on her very best things to walk about alone in. Her enemies would say that dancing with a prince had turned her head outright, if she put on her best black silk merely to walk down to the pier. Still, she would like Gerald to see her looking her best—her very best—before he returned to England and to Lucia! She looked over her wardrobe with a melancholy sense of its deficiencies, such as she had never felt before. The black silk—that was too good; a gingham or two, very much washed out, and very short in the skirt; and one checked muslin, hopelessly dirty and tumbled: this was all. Her two white piqués, the best frocks she possessed, she had worn, with reckless extravagance, during the past happy, prodigal week, and they were both at the wash. And Gerald had said he always liked best to see her in white. As she remembered this, a sudden bold inspiration came across Miss Lovell's brain. She would wear the muslin skirt that had served as a slip to her ball-dress the night before. The audacity of the project almost daunted her at first. Bettina had declared that slip to be fine enough for a dress; that it would wear clean four more balls at least; and here was she going to put it on—clear Swiss muslin by daylight—and drag it through the dust and defilement of the Morteville streets. Dire necessities demand stringent measures. Archie vacillated and trembled before she could bring herself to commit the desperate act; once even took down the dirty checked muslin and half put it over her head; then the thought of how she would look in that other skirt—fresh, white, long—a regular grown-up woman's dress—overcame her again. Should Mr Durant take away a last impression of Archie the tawny-haired child, the little model—the gipsy; or

of Archie as he had danced with her at the ball—a young lady in fair white muslin, "dressed like other people?"

The magic of those four fatal words (which annually, statisticians tell us, are the ruin of thousands of people in all ranks) was too potent for Archie to withstand. She succumbed to the strongest temptation her life as yet had known; put on the white skirt; a high white jacket to match; a little white scarf on her shoulders; her sailor's hat, with a blue veil, the colour of her eyes, twisted round it; and a pair of lemon-coloured gloves which Bettina had cleaned up a day or two before, vainly hoping they might be fresh enough to wear at the ball. When she was dressed she ran into the salon, and stood up on a chair to see herself in the great glass. What a pretty girl she was! How well white muslin suited her clear dark skin by daylight! How she hoped every Englishwoman in the place would meet her on her way to the pier! Would anything improve her appearance still? Yes, certainly; Bettina's best French grey parasol (a gift from dear Madame Bonnechose, who had it from her mamma in Paris, and thought it too worldly for her own use); and a flower, to make a spot of colour, in her waist-belt. The first dereliction from the narrow path seemed to have made any further enormity perfectly easy to Archie. She walked off to Bettina's room, coolly abstracted the parasol from its silver-paper wrappings; then out into the garden, where she picked the last bright red Geant des Batailles that remained; the standard rose-trees being the special property of the old Countess d'Eu on the second floor, and ever regarded, till this hour, with fear and trembling, by all the other inmates of the house. Then, having collected her spoils, she went back to the salon, perched herself on the chair to arrange the rose, and to pronounce herself a pretty girl again; and two minutes later started forth, putting the door-key of the apartment in her pocket, for her walk.

The Maloney was watching her, cat-like, from behind her curtain, and Archie looked up and nodded at the wizened face with her sweetest smile; and a little further down the street she met Mrs O'Rourke, suffering visibly from the heat, and nodded to her likewise with perfectly good temper (with that muslin dress on she could have forgiven all her enemies at once); and coming

near the pier, she saw the Prince, and tried to throw down her eyelids demurely—as she had watched the great Paris ladies do—when he saluted her; and then, twenty yards further, Gerald Durant met her. He had been waiting for her for an hour, he said; and his eyes told Miss Lovell pretty plainly what he thought of her looks, now that she had come.

They walked to the end of the pier, and Archie felt very melancholy at the sight of the excursion-boat, which, with steam up, was moored at some distance out in the Roads.

"You will start soon, Mr Durant. The people are already beginning to go off in boats."

Gerald took out his watch. "I shall go in a quarter of an hour—that is, if the vessel starts at the time advertised. I see my servant has taken the luggage off already. He is determined that I shall not change my mind this time, Miss Wilson."

"There is not much temptation to make you change it," cried Archie, trying to speak gaily. "The heat and dust, and crowds of excursionists and porters, are not likely to give you a favourable last impression of Morteville." For they were trying to talk polite commonplaces, as people who like each other invariably do on the eve of separation.

"And you will have to walk back alone through it all," said Gerald. "Miss Wilson, let me see you back, at least to the other end of the pier. I shall have quite time enough to do that."

"No, thank you; I prefer being here. I like seeing the people go off in the boats, and—and I mean to stop and see the very last of the steamer," added Archie, with sudden sincerity.

At that moment a boat pulled round under the pier head, across which they were leaning, and the boatman stood up, his scarlet cap in his hand, and asked Gerald, in such English as the Morteville boatmen use, if he was going to the steamer. It was a clean, trim little boat, unlike most of the luggage-boats used for carrying passengers to the steamers; and Archie looked down at it with wistful eyes.

"What a nice boat, Mr Durant! You had better engage it at once to take you on board."

"There is plenty of time still, unless you wish to get rid of me," Gerald answered, his eyes fixed upon her face.

"But you could row about a little first. I am sure it would be a great deal pleasanter than waiting here in the sun."

In after days, Gerald often soothed his conscience with the recollection of this remark of Archie's. But for it—but for the childish whim that prompted it—he had never brought deeper pain than that of saying "Good-bye" to him into her life. He would no more have thought of asking her to accompany him to the steamer than of asking her to accompany him to England. But all through Gerald Durant's life, as through the lives of all weak men, there seemed to run a mysterious chain of accident that bound him, whether he willed or no, to the commission of every sort of foolish and unfortunate action. A fresh link in the chain had been supplied by Archie's last words; and in a minute Gerald turned the new temptation to the very best account, as he always did.

"It really would be much pleasanter. The sea is like glass, and I dare say the air is cool outside the harbour. You never go out in a small boat like this, I suppose?"

"Oh yes, I do, very often," said the girl, promptly. "I row about often with papa; row with my hands, you understand; perhaps that is what makes them so brown."

"But you would not care to go now? You would not go without your papa? You would be afraid?"

"Afraid! What of? Being drowned?"

"Oh no, Miss Wilson, of—of—" Gerald's eyes fell; he did not like to say, "of what people might think of you if you went."

"Of hurting my dress, do you mean? Good gracious, no! I should enjoy it of all things, and if you didn't mind I should like just to run up into the steamer for a moment. I never was in a steamer but once, from Livorno to Cività Vecchia, and that's so long ago I scarcely recollect it now."

In another minute the boat was hailed, and Miss Lovell, in high glee, ran down the slippery, weed-grown steps at the end of the pier, took the boatman's sun-burnt hand, jumped into the boat, Mr Durant following; and then—then she found herself out alone with him on the transparent glassy sea, with Morteville, like a place in a dream, lying behind her!

CHAPTER XIV.

AT SEA.

"How thoroughly I enjoy this!" Archie cried, laying down Bettina's grand parasol in a pool of salt-water on one of the seats, and pushing her hat back a little from her forehead. "The ball was very well, but this is better. I think boating is better than anything else in the world, Mr Durant."

Whatever Archie did was, while she did it, better than anything else in the world. Gerald looked at the girl, and actually sighed to think that these were his last ten minutes with her. How blank all would be without the bright face, the joyous voice, this evening! How rosy life might be with this sweet contagion of enjoyment ever present! How hard, in short, it would be to return to Lucia and to the Court after Archie Wilson and Morteville!

"I can enjoy nothing heartily to-day, Miss Wilson. I am saying good-bye to you, you must remember."

"And going back to London and all your London friends," she returned, quickly. "I shall miss you more to-morrow than you will miss me."

To-morrow! The word had a strange sort of knell in it just now. Was this happy intimacy, this bright interchange of youthful jests, fancies, hopes—all but love—to be indeed cold and dead for ever to-morrow? They remained silent, both of them; Archie's eyes fixed yearningly upon the dim white cliffs of England across the channel, and Gerald's upon her face. The boatman, meanwhile, thinking, in perfect good faith, that they were fellow-passengers bound for the Lord of the Isles, and hoping perhaps to be in time to pick up a second fare, pulled on straight for the steamer out in the Roads.

"*Nous voila!*" he remarked aloud, almost, it seemed to Archie, before the measured fall of the sculls had sounded a score of times. "Monsieur and madame ought already to be on board."

Gerald took out his watch and declared that there were still ten minutes to spare. "Would you really like to go on board, or

shall we remain as we are?" he added, to Archie. "I think this is much the pleasantest."

"No," said Miss Lovell, dreading, she scarcely knew why, to go through any more lonely farewells. "I should really like to go on board with you for a minute or two, unless you mind it. It will seem almost as if I had seen you part of the way."

The boat was now alongside of the steamer, and a couple of stout English arms were already outstretched to help Archie up the companion-ladder. As Gerald was about to follow her the boatman took off his cap and demanded his fare, one franc each. "Oh, very well," said Gerald, "perhaps I may as well pay you at once. Two francs, and how much for mademoiselle's return?"

He spoke in excellent French, as far as grammar went, but his accent, I suppose, had something alien about it; something, at all events, that was alien to the ear of a Morteville boatman. To return? but nothing—nothing. There was nothing to pay for returning; he meant with his empty boat.

Gerald, however, tossed another franc into his hand. "Wait on this side," he cried, when he had run up on deck, and was looking down at the boatman's perplexed face, "we shall be off in five minutes."

"Mais oui, monsieur, vous partirez dans cinq minutes. Merci, monsieur, merci ma petite dame." And then, with a heightened opinion of Englishmen as regards their generosity rather than their sense, he quietly pulled off towards shore, and Gerald led Archie to the after part of the vessel.

She was as much amused as a child with everything she saw on deck, and asked Gerald presently if she might go down and see the cabin.

"Well, if we have time," he answered, "although I don't think there is much you would care to see there. How long before we leave?" he called after the steward, who was passing at the moment. "Five minutes, still. Well, then, we may run down and up again, Miss Wilson, but there will not be time for more."

They went down, and the atmosphere of the cabin, with ranges of human beings on all sides already preparing themselves for seasickness, did not make Archie wish to linger there. As they came up the cabin-stairs the last bell rang.

"And you will only have just time to leave the vessel," said Gerald, taking her hand. "Miss Wilson, the moment for saying good-bye has come."

"Good-bye, Mr Durant," she answered, in rather a choked voice. "Good-bye, and I hope some day we shall see each other again."

He whispered another word or two of tender regret at parting, as he hurried her across to the gangway by which they had come on board; then—Mr Durant stood aghast! No boat was to be seen. He rushed across to the other side of the vessel, thinking that the boatman had mistaken his orders; but nothing was to be discovered of him. The boat that had brought the last passengers was already half-way back to the harbour; the steam up; the captain in his place of command upon the bridge.

"Good heavens, this will never do!" cried Gerald, the whole seriousness of the situation breaking upon him far more vividly than it did on Archie, who stood quiet, and a little pale at saying good-bye, but without any misgiving as to her own return. "Stop here for one moment, Miss Wilson, while I see what can be done."

He would have made his way, had it been possible, to speak to the captain at once; but a tide of second-class excursionists, who were being driven forward by the steward, well-nigh pinned him to his place. He breasted the crowd manfully, and after two or three minutes' hard fighting had gained the point he strove for; but these three minutes had been the loss of everything. The vessel was already in motion. He was lavish in his offers of money; but the captain was inflexible.

Cases of this kind were constantly occurring among excursionists, he said; it might be as much as his command was worth to stop the vessel. If they had spoken sooner it might have been possible to lower one of the ship's boats, but nothing could be done now. They would stop in an hour or so at Calais, and the lady might disembark there if she chose. The Calais fêtes were going on, and she would be able to get back by another excursion-steamer to Morteville that afternoon. And this was the consolation Gerald had to bear back to Archie.

For an instant after he had told her in what position she stood,

Miss Lovell laughed aloud; thinking to herself what excellent fun this mistake was. Then, to Gerald's horror, her lips trembled, and the great tears rushed up into her eyes.

"Away! I'll not go away to Calais!" she cried, passionately. "That wicked boatman, to dare to leave me here. Oh, papa, papa!" And she stretched out imploring hands towards Morteville, already growing indistinct in the distance, while the tears not only gathered in her eyes, but rained down her cheeks. "I never meant it—you know I never meant it!" she sobbed. "Oh, I wish papa was here. I wish I had never left papa."

In his heart Gerald at this moment most devoutly wished it too. The society of the prettiest woman in the world would have been dearly purchased to him by scenes or tears or trouble of any kind. "It's an awful bore, Miss Wilson; I would have given anything for it not to have happened. But—well, crying can do no good, can it? and the boat stops at Calais, after all."

"And, after all, I shall be a hundred miles from home still," cried Archie, not without temper. "What good will Calais be to me? I won't go to Calais."

She looked so pretty as she made this assertion, her cheeks flushed up with childish passion, and the tears standing on her long eyelashes, that Gerald could not but be touched. If women will cry, it is a great thing when they know how to do it without getting ugly; and, if the worst came to the worst, it would indisputably be pleasant to have Miss Wilson's company—scenes and tears apart—as far as London. "You shall not go to Calais or anywhere else, Miss Wilson, unless you like it; that is to say, if you don't land at Calais you must come on to London, for the boat stops nowhere else, and I will see you off, or come with you, if you'll let me, by the Folkestone mail, and you will be home again early to-morrow morning."

"In time to meet the twelve o'clock train from Amiens?"

"Certainly; long before that." Gerald in reality knew nothing whatever about the hours of trains or steamers; but he spoke authoritatively, as men generally do in default of accurate knowledge, and Archie's face brightened. It was consolation, at least, to know that she might be home in time to meet her father—for the thought of him, far more than of herself, troubled her; con-

solation that, whether she landed at Calais or went on to London, she would certainly have time to get the silver-grey parasol back into its paper before Bettina's return. And so, recovering her common sense, Miss Lovell dried away her tears, and even rallied her spirits, so far as to be very much amused, standing by Gerald's side, and looking at the different objects along the coast all the way from Morteville to Calais.

Her adventures, however, were not destined to end yet. As they neared the Calais pier, and when again they were talking of saying good-bye, Archie, to her horror, descried a whole crowd of Mortevilleites assembled there—Miss Marks, Captain Waters, all the Montacutes and others—Mortevilleites who had gone over for the morning to the Calais fêtes, and who were now waiting for the steamer to take them home. It had been her glory hitherto to shock these people by her childish escapades; but that was at Morteville, at her father's side. All her courage, all her sauciness, were gone with the sense of his protection; and as the Lord of the Isles steamed up slowly alongside, she clung close to Gerald's side, her veil pulled down over her face, and her heart beating too thickly for her to say a word. The tide had risen sufficiently for them to come close in; and Captain Waters recognised Gerald Durant, and called out a few friendly remarks to him from the pier. What a vile boat to have chosen for his return to London. He (Waters) wished, whatever the boat, that he was going there too. Had been boring himself all the morning at this atrocious fête, and was waiting now for some disgusting little French steamer to take him back to Morteville, *et cetera*.

At the sound of Waters's voice, Archie Lovell's heart beat thicker and thicker. "Mr Durant, what must I do?" she whispered. "Decide for me, please. Tell me how you think my father would wish me to act. If I land here, every one of these people will see me; if I go on, and come back by Folkestone, as you said, there will be a chance, at least, of their knowing nothing about it, won't there?" And she clung with frightened, imploring eagerness to his arm.

And Gerald Durant hesitated—the passengers already coming on board; every moment worth a year of common life to Archie—hesitated; pressed her trembling hand closer; thought how charm-

ing it would be to have her with him still; how strangely fate seemed ever to bring *him* into temptation and mischance of every kind; how— Nay, but I need not record his thoughts in full. He was simply true to his irresponsible, vacillating nature: sentimentalized when he should have acted; thought of the pleasant spending of a summer's day, not of the child's life whose marring might depend so utterly upon his decision; and in another five minutes the Lord of the Isles was on her course again—the possibility of Archie Lovell's return gone.

She stood silent until they were wholly out of sight of the people on the pier, then threw up her veil, and told Gerald, with a smile, that she felt quite brave now, and he need not be afraid of any more tears or tempers. For her father's sake, she added, she thought that she had done right to go on. It would have tortured him if the Morteville gossips had got up any stories about her going to Calais, and no doubt now she would be able to return home quietly before any of them were up to-morrow morning. How lucky that Jeanneton was safe away, and that she had the door-key in her own pocket; and how pleasant it really was out here at sea! "As I must go to London whether I like it or not, I may as well enjoy going to London—may I not, Mr Durant? Now that everything is inevitable, and that I am sure I'll be home before papa, I feel what fun it really is to run away. (I tried to run away once in Napoli when I was little, but a fisherman caught me, and gave me up to Bettina for two scudi.) And you—you look as miserable, Mr Durant, as if you were a conspirator going to be caught and hung in chains the moment we arrive in London!"

"I am not at all miserable, Miss Wilson," answered Gerald, a little confusedly; for the girl's desperate ignorance of evil did, now that it was too late, begin to awaken self-reproach in his heart —"I was only envying you your rare happiness of disposition. A Morteville ball, or a Morteville luggage boat, or a Morteville excursion steamer—you can enjoy them all alike! It is enough to make a man sad, you know, when he looks on at a child's amusement, and remembers that he, alas! is a child no longer."

But although his conscience stung him sharply for a moment, before half an hour was over Gerald had ceased to think whether

he was to blame or not, and had returned to all his old delight in Archie's society. His temperament always made him imperatively crave to be amused; and Archie always amused him! Their fellow-passengers, French and English; the different faces, as they grew white and grim, under the throes of on-coming sea-sickness; every little ludicrous incident of the voyage, her quick perception seized upon, and put, for his benefit, into quaint and graphic language. She was excellent company always; but, above all, in travelling; for, from the time she was a baby, her father had always encouraged her *bavard* tongue at such times, and Archie had not been slow to profit by his leave to talk. How charming a winter's yachting in the Mediterranean, or a summer's sport in Norway, would be with such a companion, Gerald thought, as she chatted on: it was about the thousandth time that he had thought how charming some particular position of life would be with her; what a pity it was that all this fine sense of the ludicrous that made a woman so companionable was a missing sense in Lucia. Poor Lucia! He had gone yachting with her once, he remembered, and she looked very green and plain, and cried because he would not attend on her when she was sea-sick, and wanted umbrellas and parasols and cloaks to be brought to her continually, under every fresh vicissitude of the complaint. Archie was not sick a bit. The healthy blood shone as bright through her clear skin on sea as on shore; the sun was not too hot for her, or the wind too cold; in fine, she enjoyed herself and made him do the same, just as she had done through all the happy hours that they had spent together during the past week. Was it possible that the whole affair might be a serious one? that destiny, not accident, had brought about this strange voyage? that in spite of Lucia—of every hope—of every promise of his life, this blue-eyed child was to be his fate after all?

It was no time or place to talk sentiment now. A fresh breeze from the west began to blow as they neared the Foreland, and soon sea-sickness in all its Promethean forms was around them. "Could we get anywhere out of the way?" Archie asked, as victim after victim fell before the rising breeze. "I don't feel ill a bit, but it certainly would be pleasanter if we could get away from all these people."

"We could go upon one of the paddle-boxes," answered Gerald, "only that you are much too thinly clad, Miss Wilson. But if you would not mind wearing one of my coats upon your shoulders, I'll tell Bennett to get you one, and then—"

Just at this moment a stout motherly-looking old lady, who had been sitting near them all the voyage, tottered abruptly to her feet, and with the choking terseness characteristic of sea-sickness, entreated Gerald to help her to the cabin-stairs. "If you'd like my cloak, take it," she added, turning to Archie, as Gerald, with his prompt good-nature, steadied one leviathan arm between both his hands; "the cloak—on the seat there"—and the inmates of the cabin and the steward, fortunately ascending the stairs at the moment, heard the rest.

"Good old lady," cried Miss Lovell. "The very thing I wanted! See, Mr Durant, a scarlet cloak with a hood to it—home-made, evidently—and with the old lady's initials neatly marked on a bit of tape at the back." And then she put the cloak on—very picturesque and gipsy-like she looked in it—and ran up lightly, at Gerald's side, to the top of the nearest paddle-box. "I call this delicious," she cried, as the fresh air blew upon her face. "If my hat did not come off every minute, I should want nothing in the world. Mr Durant, you couldn't lend me a handkerchief to tie it on with, could you?"

Gerald called to his valet, who happened to be close at hand—wonderful to say of a valet, not ill—and five minutes later the superb Mr Bennett handed to Miss Lovell an exquisitely embroidered piece of cambric that he had taken from his master's valise for her use.

"You don't mean to say that this is a handkerchief for yourself?" said Archie, as she examined it. "Why, it's fitter for a girl, much, than for a man. Such fine batiste, and so beautifully stitched in lilac, and this fine embroidered monogram in the corner! Mr Durant, what a dandy you are!"

"A dandy without intending it," said Gerald, carelessly. He rather liked Lucia to call him a dandy, but hated the word from Archie's mocking lips. "I leave all such matters to Bennett. He filled a portmanteau full of these trumperies for me before we left Paris, but I have not looked at them yet. Take your hat off, Miss

Wilson, I will hold it for you, and tie the handkerchief round your head—so. Now, do you feel that you have everything in the world you want? You ought, I am sure." And Mr Durant looked long and admiringly at the mignonne, brown face so well set off by the coquettish head-dress and scarlet cloak, and background of blue sky.

"As far as dress is concerned, yes," answered Miss Lovell; "but"—she hesitated, and wondered whether she was committing an impropriety; then nature was too strong for her, and out the truth came, "but I wonder whether they give one dinner on board excursion-steamers. I *am* so hungry."

Mr Bennett was called again in a moment, and a quarter of an hour later an excellent little impromptu pic-nic, consisting of chicken, ham, rolls, peaches, and champagne, was brought up on the paddle-box. Miss Lovell partook of it with hearty appetite that no accident could check, and which on the present occasion was sharpened by the sea air; and Gerald ate too, but by snatches; and waited on Archie, steadying her plate and holding her tumbler, and laughing and jesting with her on her awkwardness every time that a lurch of the vessel made her clutch with her little brown hands at her chicken or her bread to prevent them rolling from her lap. And so the time fled by. When they had finished their meal they were already past the Foreland; an advancing tide helped them quickly along up the river; and at a few minutes after seven the distant chimneys and spires of the great city first rose before Archie Lovell's excited eyes.

It was a glorious August evening, and as the vessel steamed slowly up to London Bridge, the city, under the magic touch of sunset, seemed transfigured from its accustomed smoke and blackness into a veritable city of the saints; a city of prophyry, amethyst, and gold. Rank above rank, far away over the west, lay serried hosts of crystalline, vermilion clouds, gradually dying into ether as they neared the delicate opal-green of the horizon. The Thames, not a volume of yellowish-grey mud, but the Thames of Turner, broke under the arches of the bridge into a thousand burning, diamond-coloured flakes of light. Every barge-sail or steamer-funnel on the river glowed rosy-red; every squalid house and wall along the quays had received some subtle hue of violet

or of amber to transmute its ugliness. Mast and cupola, dome and spire, river and wharf—the alchemy of sunset touched them all alike into beauty. And high above, for once not a heavy mass of smoke-coloured lead, rose St Paul's; in Archie's sight a heaven-tinted dome bearing aloft the cross, a golden promise, a light, a hope to all the toiling restless city at its foot.

Her heart beat as though with a new life. She had heard from Bettina that London was hideous, foggy, wicked; she saw it a majestic city, a dream of golden sky and river, grand bridge, and stately wharf, and heaven-tinted dome. What must existence be here! What noble lives must not men and women lead in such a place, compared to the lives they led in poor little towns like Morteville! How she hoped there would be time for her to see one London street—ah, yes, one would suffice; with its brilliancy, and riches, and crowds of city-dressed people—before she had to start upon her journey home. In a sort of ecstasy she pressed her hand on Gerald's arm as they were standing on the deck, and made known this desire to him in a whisper. Cheapside, or Piccadilly, or Oxford Street, she said; mentioning the few London names she knew. Anywhere would do; but she would give all she possessed (two francs and a half—poor Archie!—and the door-key) to see one street, with the shops gas-lit, before she left.

The request, and the hand-pressure, and the up-turned glance from the mignonne face, sent the blood to Gerald's heart. A stronger man than he was, might, perhaps, have lost his coolness a little at such an hour, and alone with such a companion as Archie; and he stooped and whispered a few very sweet, very mad, words into the girl's ear; words not absolutely disloyal as yet, not more disloyal than those he had already spoken when they stood together on the terrace by the sea at Morteville; but words such as Lucia Durant, could she have heard them, would for very certain not have approved.

Before Archie could answer, before she could even think how much or how little Gerald's answer meant, the steamer had stopped. At once a hoarse Babel of sounds—foreign sounds they seemed to her—greeted them from the wharf; the pent-up tide of excursionists, all eager to land, and untroubled by luggage, bore them resistlessly on towards the crowded narrow gangway, and in

another minute Archie Lovell's feet, for the first time in her life, rested upon English ground.

CHAPTER XV.

MR DURANT'S GENEROSITY.

"And I have got the old lady's cloak on still, Mr Durant! What, in heaven's name, am I to do with it?" Gerald and Miss Lovell had been driven from the Thames pier to the London Bridge station, and were now waiting until a sublimely-indifferent clerk would condescend to give them information about the tidal train to Folkestone. "She told me, as we came up the river, I might wear it till we got to London; and then in the hurry of landing I forgot all about her and her cloak and everything else. What ought I to do with it?"

"Keep it, if it is worth anything; leave it in the waiting-room if it is not," said Gerald, unhesitatingly. "I wonder, Miss Lovell, that you should ask any questions on such a point."

"Well, it really is old—old! and washed and mended," said Archie, falling at once into Gerald's easy morality, "so it can't matter much to the owner whether it's lost or not. I'll just keep it on for the present, and then, if I find it too warm, leave it behind me somewhere. I would never like the prince, or M. Gounod, or any of my partners, to see me land on the Morteville pier in it." Only this last part of the remark Miss Lovell made to herself, not aloud.

The sublimely-indifferent clerk now imparted to them that the tidal train for Folkestone left at half-past ten; in rather more than two hours, that was to say, from the present time. "And I can wait very well alone here at the station," said Archie, a little shyly; "and it is really time for us to say good-bye. Mr Durant, I have given you so much trouble, and I am so much obliged to you for your kindness!" They had only talked common-places since that last whisper of Gerald's on board the steamer, and the girl turned her eyes away from him as she spoke.

"Would you rather be without me, Miss Wilson? Say so, and I will go away at once."

"I don't want to trouble you, Mr Durant. I think you must have had quite enough of me without waiting any longer here."

"And if I have not had enough of you? If I want exceedingly to stay and be of some use to you to the last?"

She smiled, holding down her face still, and Gerald, instead of going away, told his valet, who, observant and mystified, was waiting a few yards from where they stood, to get a cab and take his luggage home at once.

"Without you, sir?"

"Without me. I shan't be home till late. I am going to spend the evening at Mr Dennison's in the Temple, most likely."

After which Mr Bennett went off, thankful, whatever happened, that he had at length got the luggage fairly in his own hands, and so could not by possibility be taken back to Morteville—a contingency he had several times speculated on as quite in the power of his master's companion to effect—and Mr Durant and Archie were alone.

"Do I look mad, or foreign, or what?" she whispered, coming up close to Gerald's side. "These English people all stare at me so strangely as they go by."

Her face was flushed with excitement; her sailor's hat, as the wind had left it, a little on one side; her long hair hanging over her neck and shoulders; and this disarray, and her singular beauty, added perhaps to the fact of her being dressed in white muslin and a scarlet cloak, undoubtedly made her look different to the female British traveller ordinarily to be met with at this hour of the night at London stations.

"Perhaps if we were to go to the waiting-room," suggested Gerald, "you would like to have tea or coffee, or something, and while they are getting it, you might—"

"Make myself look human," interrupted Archie. "All right, only you need not have hesitated. The faces of the people as they go by tell me plainly enough the kind of monster they think me." And then she took Gerald's arm and tripped off with him down the long echoing passage that they were told led to the refreshment-room. Tripped with feet that seemed to tread on air, so happy

was she. The voyage had been delightful enough, but these breathless after-adventures were better still; these crowds of strangers, this foreign tongue—for to hear English spoken about her was foreign to Archie; above all, the sense of being in London, and alone, without Bettina, without her father! Once, years ago, in Florence, she had got out upon the roof of the six-storied house where they lodged, and gazed with intoxicated, wondrous delight upon the altered world at her feet. Something of the same delicious giddiness, the same sense of wrong-doing and danger, and intense excitement, all blent into one, was upon her now. Of coming to positive harm—harm from which all her future life should never thoroughly free her—she had no more fear than she had, as a child, of falling down and being killed upon the Florence pavement.

In the refreshment-room a young person with an eighteen-inch waist, and shining black hair, *à l'impératrice*, received with supreme composure Gerald's modest command of tea for two, and then, more than ever ashamed of herself from a certain expression she had read in the superb young person's eyes, Miss Lovell found her way to the ladies' waiting-room. The typical occupants of ladies' waiting-rooms were there. A fierce old maid, sitting bolt upright by the table, guarding eleven packages and a bird-cage, all of which she tried with a glare to clutch every time any one looked at her; a farmer's daughter, on her way from Somerset to a situation in Kent, who asked imbecile questions, and jumped up, with her face on fire, every time she heard a door open or a bell ring; a stout lady, maternally occupied with a stout infant in a corner; and a thin lady with six children, out of temper, two nurses, a baby, bottles, food, toys, and children's luggage of all kinds, filling up the remaining portions of the room. Every woman and child present stared up with open eyes at Archie; the old maid by the table clutched her parcels tight, and shook her head meaningly at the thin lady, as much as to say, "You see I was right, madam. No knowing what sort of characters you may meet when you travel."

"Dressing-room to the right," cried an austere personage, the presiding official of the place, who was sitting, with her hands before her, on the only comfortable chair the room afforded; and

into the dressing-room Miss Lovell, more and more ashamed of herself, fled for refuge. There was a light from a gas-burner about twenty feet high, and a tall, dim looking-glass, and some very dark-complexioned water; no towels, no soap: can railway companies be expected to care how ladies wash their carnal hands?—but provision for the spirit in the shape of large printed texts on placards round the walls; a Bible and Prayer-book on a little deal table; also a missionary box. Miss Lovell dipped her face into water, and dried it on Mr Durant's fine lawn handkerchief, which she happened to have left in the pocket of the cloak; pinned all her rebellious locks as tight and smooth as they would lie around her head; put her sailor's hat on straight, arranged the old red cloak decorously, and pulled down her blue gauze veil close over her face.

As she walked demurely back in this improved condition, she had the satisfaction of finding that the people stared at her somewhat less. "Which shows that it was nothing but my hair that made me look odd!" she remarked, seating herself opposite to Gerald, after ridding herself of her cloak and hat like a child, and tossing them down on a chair. "It's all very well to follow papa's picturesque tastes in Morteville, but directly I come to England—I mean, if I ever come here—I shall take very good care to look like other people. Now, I wonder," abruptly, "what your cousin Lucia would have thought if she had seen me a few minutes ago?"

The mere suggestion made Gerald wince. What would Lucia—what would any one who knew Lucia—think of his companion at this moment? She was looking prettier than ever; her face aglow from its recent bath; her bright wet hair negligently coiled round her head; her little brown hands clasped together on the table, as she leaned forward to speak to him; her blue eyes all alight with animation as they looked full into his. Born and bred in Italy, this girl had in her very nature something of the joyous, careless abandonment of the women of the south. Her voice was musical always, but she spoke out—I will not say loud—as Englishwomen of pure race do not; she gesticulated, ever so little, as she talked; when she laughed, she laughed with free expansion of the chest, with fullest showing of the white teeth. In the drawing-room of a duchess Archie in an instant might have taken her stand as what

she was; an English girl, gentle by birth, but with some subtle inoculation of southern eagerness and passion in her veins, and a want of manner so thorough as to be the very perfection of that which all artificial manner aims at—simplicity. But the waiting-room of the South-Eastern terminus is not the drawing-room of a duchess; and whether her hair hung down loosely over her shoulders, or was coiled in this bright broad coronet above her face, looks of admiration, a great deal too coarse for Gerald's taste to brook, continued to be cast on poor Archie from every pair of male eyes that approached her.

"The English people are the worst-bred in the world," he remarked; so pointedly that a good old papa of fifty at a neighbouring table, who had been staring at them uninterruptedly for five minutes, immediately sank his head abashed into his newspaper. "Foreigners live in public, and are accustomed to it from the time they are six years old. The true Briton, when he does leave his den, stares about him as if he was at a wild-beast show. Now that we are going to eat," he added, laughing, for the girl began to look distressed in earnest, "we shall probably be found more interesting still. There is something peculiarly grateful to the citizen mind in watching curious animals feed. You will have something to eat with your coffee?" Doubtfully this, for it was not three hours since they had dined, and Gerald was ignorant as to how many meals a school-girl's appetite could require a day.

"Please. Nothing solid, though. Bread and butter, or brioche, or some fruit."

The superb young person signified, with dignity, that bread and butter, brioche, and fruit, were things unknown to her. There were the refreshments that they saw upon the counter; fossilized sausage-rolls, battered old sandwiches, lava-hued buns strewn over with a cinderish deposit of currants, and packages of Wotherspoon's lozenges; and from these refreshments they could choose.

"Bring some buns, then," said Gerald, pointing out what appeared to him the least horrible object present; and buns were brought, and eaten by Archie—Mr Durant looking on in silent wonder and admiration; and then the tea—very hot and very unlike tea—was drunk; and Archie began to put on her gloves;

and their talk went round again to what they would do with the hour and a quarter they still had to spare.

"There would be no time, of course, to see anything?" said the girl; but her voice made it a question. "I mean anything of the London streets and shops?"

"Well, I don't see why not," Gerald answered, taking out his watch, either because he wanted really to know the time, or because he did not care just then to meet the full gaze of Archie's eyes. "These hansom fellows go so quick, I think, if we were to take one, we might have time to get to the West End and back. Piccadilly, was it not, Miss Wilson, that you wished to see?"

"Oh yes; Piccadilly, or anywhere else," said Archie, to whom the words West End, Piccadilly, or hansom, all conveyed about the same meaning. "You know, of course, how much time we shall have. I'll do just as you think best."

"You will, Miss Wilson?"

"Yes, of course."

"Then let us go." And they rose; and while Gerald went to pay for the tea, Archie remained before a glass that hung close beside the table, putting on her hat and arranging her collar, and smoothing back her hair—with all the little well-contented gestures that come so naturally to a pretty girl before a looking-glass—and thinking how pleasant this drive by gaslight would be, and how sorry—with a great pang this!—how sorry she would be to part from Gerald at the end of it all. To part: to return to Morteville: and for him to go away and marry his cousin Lucia, and never think of her again while he lived!

When she got as far as this in her reflections, a mist swam before Miss Lovell's eyes. She brushed her hand before them hastily, for she had a child's shame of tears yet, as well as a child's facility in shedding them; and then, looking up into the glass again, she saw not only her own face reflected there, but a man's—and a man's she knew.

The vision came upon her so quickly that instead of turning round at once, she continued for a full minute to gaze, spell-bound like one in a dream, into the glass. Where had she known that face? In what country, at what time of her life, had those rough

features, that gentle kindly expression, been so familiar to her? If her father's face had suddenly appeared above her shoulder, it could scarce have seemed more home-like than did this one; and still she could recall no name to which it belonged. It was an English face; and what Englishman had she ever known intimately in her life? She was on the point of turning round when the stranger, whoever he was, moved away abruptly; and when she did turn, three or four men were walking near her in different directions. Which of these could have been he who stood and looked at her? She had not the slightest clue by which to divine. One of the men was in a grey overcoat, the rest were in dark clothes. This was all she could tell about them; all probably that she would ever know about her vision. It must have been a chance likeness only that had startled her, she thought; a likeness most probably to some German or Italian friend of her father's, who had held her on his knee when she was a child, and the remembrance of whose face had slumbered in her memory till now. What a coward she must be that her heart should beat so quickly, the colour all die out of her cheek—she had watched it do so in the glass—for such an accident!

But accident or coincidence, whichever it was, the vision had wrought a singular and utter revulsion in Archie's feelings. The expression of that face she had seen was grave and pitying; and instinctively the thought of it brought her father before her, and made her stop short, and reflect upon what all this was that she was doing. For the first time since she got clear of the Calais pier, she felt frightened, and wished she was at home. Bettina had often told her that men were wicked and designing—good-looking, fashionable men the worst of all. How could she know that Mr Durant was not desperately wicked, in spite of his handsome face and pleading voice? Suppose she went away for this drive with him, and he did not bring her back in time, and she missed the train, and never reached Morteville next morning, and when her father and Bettina came back they would find Jeanneton crying under the portecocher, and the door locked, and herself, Archie, gone. At this dreadful picture her lips quivered, a choking feeling rose in her throat, and when Gerald came back and offered her his arm, she was too agitated and too afraid to trust her own voice

to speak. So, interpreting her altered manner in the way most flattering to himself, he led her away through the station, whispering a few encouraging words as they went, and pressing ever so slightly the little hand that he could feel was trembling nervously as it rested on his arm.

When they were outside he bade her wait one moment while he ran to hail a cab from the stand, about twenty or thirty yards distant, and then Miss Lovell spoke. "Please don't get a cab for me, Mr Durant, I would rather not go, if you don't mind. I would rather wait here."

From any other woman Gerald would have expected this change of mind, and have argued the point. From Archie he knew that it was earnest, not a feint; and he remained dead silent. "I hope you won't think me silly to turn about so," she entreated him softly, "but when you were gone I began to recollect—about papa, you understand, and getting home—and I thought how dreadful it would be if I missed the train. Now, you are not cross with me?"

"Miss Wilson," he remarked, drily, "tell the whole truth. You are afraid to trust yourself with me."

Her hand shifted uneasily on his arm. "I'm not afraid, Mr Durant, but—I don't know whether I ought. Now, I just ask you—supposing it wasn't you and me at all, do you think I ought?"

"To do what?"

"To drive about with you, and—and run the chance of losing the train."

"There need be no chance of losing it," he answered, promptly. "The question is, would you rather have an hour's drive through the cool streets, or remain in a suffocating waiting-room here?"

"Well, then, you decide for me, please!" She wanted desperately to see the shop-windows, and she felt how ungrateful it was, after all his kindness, to put so little trust in him. "If you promise me to be back in good time for the train—"

"If I promise to do all that you wish, now and for ever, Miss Wilson, will you come?"

An unwonted tremour was in his voice, and Archie Lovell's heart vibrated to it. In love with him she was not, had never

been; save, perhaps, for that second's space upon the terrace at Morteville; but she liked him, she admired him—shall I be understood if I say that she pitied him? She felt for him, in spite of his eight years' seniority, something as an elder sister might feel for a brother whom she loves, but cannot thoroughly believe in; and standing here, alone with him now, her cheeks flushed crimson with shame, to feel—even while her heart thrilled to his words—how scanty was the trust she put in him, or in his promises. And this very distrust had well-nigh hurried Archie into trusting him! It seemed so cruel to hold back from him now; during the last short hour they would be together, to deny him in anything he asked of her.

"I don't know about obeying me for ever, Mr Durant," and Gerald detected in a moment that her voice was not thoroughly steady. "There won't be much opportunity after to-night for you to obey or disobey me; but now, if you really are sure—"

The words died on Archie Lovell's lips; she drew her hand with a start from Gerald's arm. So close that he almost touched her as he passed, a man went quickly by them in the gaslight; a tall, large-built man, in a grey overcoat, and with a certain square-set about the head and shoulders that convinced Archie, although she saw no feature of his face, it was the same man who had looked across her shoulder into the glass. The same mysterious influence he had exercised upon her then, returned, only with double, treble strength, across her mind. She would *not* go away with Mr Durant: she would wait here for the train that should take her back safely to her father and Bettina.

"Are you frightened, Miss Wilson? Did that fellow touch you as he passed? or do you know him, or what?"

Archie's eyes, wide open, continued to follow the stranger until he was out of sight, and then, and not till then, she spoke. "I'm not frightened, Mr Durant, but startled. That man is some one I have known—I am certain of it—and I can't help fancying that he recognized me—"

"Oh, not at all likely," interrupted Gerald, lightly, "and if it were so, what matter? Now stay one moment here, while I cross the road and hail a cab."

Instead of arguing any more, Archie diplomatically stole her

hand again within his arm. "Mr Durant," she said, softly, "why should we waste the time by driving, after all? It's the last time we shall ever be together. Yes, the truth must be spoken at length, and we shall be far better able to talk here than rattling over the streets of London in a fiacre. Take me for a walk over the great bridge there, and I shall like it better alone with you, than being shown all the fine streets and shops in the world."

She held her face beseechingly up to his; her voice came trembling, as it always did when she was moved; and with some faint accent, some intonation rather, of Italian clinging to its sound. And then this change of mind was, by her Machiavellian instinctive art, rendered in itself so gracious, so sweet, to Gerald's vanity! He felt he could not but concede to her all she wished; nay, he could not but acknowledge that she was too generous, too true, to be led into further folly. Corrupt Gerald Durant was not, nor cynical—although his easy nature led him into actions savouring of corruption, and of cynicism on occasions. What he most admired—consequently what he was himself good enough to recognize—in Archie, was her exceeding honesty, her untaught loyal frankness. And, call it epicureanism or virtue, he did at this moment feel that it was well that she should leave him thus; well that he should be able to hang one unsullied portrait among the gallery of the women he had loved!

On the brink of every action—high or low, base or noble—Gerald Durant could be ever swerved aside by some sudden turn of sentiment like this. Sentimental, in reality, rather than passionate in love, it was in love-affairs, above all, that he was most prone to waver. A coarse selfish nature, like Robert Dennison's, walks straight to its immediate gratification; a refined selfish nature, like Gerald's, hesitates, stops short; speculates whether occasionally a higher pleasure may not be found in abnegation! And though such men have not the materials in them for great heroes or for good lovers, their very weakness, somehow, makes them intensely lovable to people stronger than themselves; and when, now and then, they do come to grief (and bring you to grief with them), you feel the whole guilt must, of necessity, belong to you, not them; which, for the sake of their consciences, is charming.

An accident, or Archie's uncompromising honesty, had saved them both; and already Gerald's imagination was moved by the thought of his own generosity; by the thought, too, that Archie would be always Archie—fair, pure, unsullied—in his recollection. Ten minutes ago, with the girl's blue eyes upraised to his, he had desired, as strongly as he ever desired anything in his life, to take her with him for that drive through London. The picturesqueness of the situation fired his fancy!—driving with this little half-foreign girl, in her sailor's hat and white dress, along the streets of London in a hansom; listening to her childish talk about all she saw; holding her hand furtively in his, probably; and watching the changed look on her face when he began to tell her at last how much he cared for her. No; at this point the picturesque situation became commonplace, and he had not fully thought it out.

Only, if a darkened life, if ruin, if despair, had chanced to ensue in after-times, Gerald would have looked back, and firmly believed, and made every one else believe with him, that he meant no wrong!

Circumstances, picturesque circumstances, had been too strong for him: just that.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE BRIDGE OF SIGHS.

Archie put her hand within his arm and drew him a step towards her, or, as she meant it to be, towards London Bridge. That step was the first one in the direction of salvation.

"It will be better than seeing shop-windows and streets," she said, repeating her last words. "I can imagine the London streets—I have driven through Amiens by gaslight—but I can't imagine what it is to stand at night upon a mighty bridge like that. Thank you," for he was walking obediently by her side now. "Mr Durant, how shall I ever thank you for all the kindness you have shown to me to-day?"

"You won't thank me in the only way I want, Miss Wilson. I don't care for any other."

"In what way shall I thank you, then? Tell me—I will do it."

"No, you will not. You cannot. The thing is over, impossible. You will go back to Morteville, marry your Russian prince, perhaps, and I—Miss Wilson," he interrupted himself, "I hope that you will write to me sometimes? Write and tell me you got to the end of your journey safely, at all events."

"I will send you a newspaper, Mr Durant"—Gerald had already found some excuse for giving her his address—"just to let you know I am safe; but as to writing—"

"As to writing?"

"No; it would be better not. When we have said 'Good-bye,' we have said it. Our lives lie apart."

"Miss Wilson—Archie, what a cruel speech!"

"A true one," she answered, quietly. "My father is a poor man, Mr Durant. A man—why should I mind telling you?—living a little under a cloud, poor papa! and we write to no one. I don't know whether we shall live in Morteville any longer, or where we shall go even when we leave; and papa and Bettina might not find it convenient that I should be writing about, giving our address. Now, you are not angry with me for refusing?"

"No, Miss Wilson; I succumb to it as a necessity. It would be against every natural law that I should hear from you. Lawyers, duns, cousins, are the human beings who always remember to write. The people one cares for, never! You will remember me a month, if you are not amused, Archie; two days, if you are."

The word "Archie" had fallen from his lips so naturally that Miss Lovell felt it would have been absurd, affected, for him not to use it. "Amused or not amused, I shall remember you," she said, simply. "I shall remember you while I live."

"And some day come to remember me with contempt probably," said Gerald. "I fancy most people do that when they think my character over."

Archie was silent.

"You don't contradict me?" he persisted. "Some day, when you look back on all this as a thing of the past, you will remember me with contempt."

"With contempt, never!"

"With what feeling, then?"

"I don't know, Mr Durant. What is the use of my trying to look forward to what I shall think when I am old and wise? I am foolish now, and—and I don't think of you with contempt. Where is the good of looking forward?"

Now the preceding little questions and answers had not been spoken uninterruptedly, as I have written them, but with such hiatuses and dislocations as must be inevitable in the speech of any two persons who should attempt to whisper soft nothings amidst a crowd of some thousands of London excursionists. One of those cheap trains to which by bitter irony the name of pleasure is prefixed, had just disgorged itself at the South-Eastern terminus, and a stream of human beings, the men beer-sustained but dreadfully depressed with baby-carrying, the women loudly miserable, the children wailing from overmuch gingerbread and want of sleep, were jostling Archie and Mr Durant at every step they took. At the moment they were about to cross the bridge three or four young men, not drunk exactly, but nearer drunk than sober, pressed up behind them with some of the remarks that to persons of their class pass current for humour respecting Archie's scarlet cloak and Gerald's hat. He had travelled in that same Tyrolese hat that he wore on the day when Archie first met him, and which was certainly not of a shape you see in London streets, save in connection with monkeys and white mice. Miss Lovell, her presence of mind forsaking her, dropped Gerald's arm, and in a second she felt herself lost! Lost in a coarse hot mob, and with three or four insolent faces—for the young men kept their attention on her still—peering under her hat and making remarks (happily lost upon her, being in slang) as to her dress and her pretty face, and "the Frenchman's"—Gerald's—want of pluck in not taking better care of her.

She was intensely, sickeningly frightened; and gave a sort of little cry—holding her hands up, as if to beg her assailants to spare her—with a word or two of Italian bursting from her in her terror. At the sound of the foreign tongue their amusement redoubled, and one, the biggest and most insolent-looking of the group, was just pushing his face into horrible closeness with Ar-

chie's, when he received the most summary check to his admiration conceivable: a blow straight between the eyes, that sent him staggering back into one of his companions' arms; also, from the circumstance of Gerald wearing a signet ring upon the little finger of his right hand, giving him a mark for life just above the bridge of his short nose. In a second, at this unexpected show of fight from "the Frenchman," every sign of a regular street-row arose.

Before Gerald could strike out again, two stout mechanics' wives, who had seen nothing whatever of the affair, were clinging on, shrieking, to each of his arms; his hat, which had fallen off in the rush he made to save Archie, was being pitched hither and thither, with shouts of derision in the crowd, and cries of "Shame, shame!" began to make themselves heard as his antagonist's face, deadly white, and covered with blood, rose up and glared vengefully about in the gaslight.

At this moment, luckily for the patricians in the affray, a couple of policemen appeared on the scene, with three or four more following rapidly, within thirty yards. As a matter of course, the man with a broken nose was collared first; for policemen, being only human, have more faith in their own eyes than in any other kind of evidence.

"It wasn't me at all!" he cried, as well as he could speak. "It was the other fellow struck me, savage, in the face."

The policeman asked who? One man, who had seen, answered "The Frenchman;" and immediately the crowd—who had not seen—vociferated "The Frenchman, the Frenchman!"

"Where is he? Point him out."

But now the crowd was a little at fault. Gerald, in a Tyrolese hat, might look unlike an Englishman; but Gerald's smooth face, without a hat at all, looked less like a Frenchman's than any man's in the crowd.

"There's the young woman as was with him!" cried a voice. "Her in the scarlet cloak and round hat."

The poor young woman in the scarlet cloak, upon this, found herself the object of attention to hundreds of eager, dirty faces, and with both of the policemen asking her for information. Which was the Frenchman?

Much too frightened to say she did not know, Archie pointed

vaguely to one of her late tormentors, a young man who happened to wear a tuft of black hair upon his chin, and gasped out:—

"He began it all—indeed, he did! This one," showing the man with the broken nose, "was not as bad. The other began it."

This was something tangible and conclusive, and gave the clue at once as to what every one had seen. The stout females who had been clinging to Gerald dropped him now, as an obscure person of no interest, and pressed forward to furnish each her quota of evidence.

"I seen the blow struck myself, sir, by this here young man with the beard, and the other man fell back, and—"

"Move on," cried one of the policemen authoritatively, as soon as he saw which two out of the mob were his men, and the rest of the force having now come up; and on the crowd was moved; the injured man in front, the supposed Frenchman tightly collared in the rear, and vainly protesting against the illegality of his capture.

Gerald, with a sign of his hand, made Archie comprehend that she should stand passively where she was and wait for him. She did so, and not until the crowd had thoroughly broken and dispersed did he return to her side.

"I'm not a bit frightened!" she cried, seizing hold of him, half-crying, half-laughing, and trembling in every limb. "Not a bit. Mr Durant, how you saved me, and how brave you were!"

"In letting another fellow be taken up for my work?" he asked.

"No, no; in coming as you did to my help. That horrible man was putting his face close—close to mine! and I felt myself getting sick and blind with fright, and then your arm struck out before me, and I was saved!"

And she clung to him.

"And, but for you, would have finished the evening at a police-station," said Gerald. "In spite of my reason I still retain the instincts of an English schoolboy, and never can help hitting out on these sorts of occasions; but it is the instinct of a fool! Only for your presence of mind I should have been carried off to the nearest lock-up house, and you would have been left here, among a London crowd, alone."

Archie trembled more than ever at the thought.

"But I don't know what presence of mind I showed, Mr Durant. How did I save you being carried off by the police?"

Gerald explained to her; and Archie felt a Quixotic impulse to rush after the crowd, tell the policeman the truth, and cause the wrong man to be freed. Then she wondered whether Gerald was right in letting the mistake go on; even to this miserable, unknown shop-boy, was it upright, loyal? and then she remembered he had done it for her sake, and clung to him again. Every question was solved by Archie at this time of her life by impulse, not principle; and the first intuitions of that fine nature were ever right. Only, like a child, when she saw that the people she liked felt differently to herself, she went over, without a struggle, to their side.

"I did not tell a story intentionally, at all events," she remarked, after a few minutes' thought. "And the man with the beard did begin—teasing me, I mean, and I hope he will be well frightened, but not put in prison, for his punishment. Mr Durant, look at your coat!" One of the sides of Gerald's coat was torn across from the collar to the arm. "And your hat—where is it? Great heavens, what can we look like?"

Unlike other people, most incontestably: Archie in the costume you know of; Gerald with his torn coat, and hatless. A policeman, one of those who had come up at the conclusion of the row, walked by just at this moment, turned, and scrutinized them narrowly. They were standing close under a lamp, and he could see both of their faces as clear as if it had been noonday.

"Luckily for me, Miss Wilson, that the night is so hot," said Gerald, speaking with intentional distinctness. He had a mortal dread, for Archie's sake, of being implicated still in the affray. "When those people were killing each other, some ruffian knocked my hat off, and the last I saw of it was making a somersault in the air over the bridge. If you really want to go further we must be making haste," he added, taking out his watch. "Our train starts at half-past ten, and it is nearly ten already."

And then X 22 moved on—whatever suspicions he might have entertained of these "foreign-looking customers" set at rest; and with the face, and voice, and trick of manner of one of them, at least, graven upon his professional memory for life.

They walked slowly on to the middle of the bridge, and soon, in her wonder and delight at what she saw, the excitement of the adventure faded from Archie Lovell's mind. She was keenly susceptible, as few girls of her age—as few women of any age—are, to emotions derived simply from without, and unconnected with personal or petty interests. Lucia would have talked for hours about the torn coat and lost hat, and all that she had gone through, and all that everybody would say when they heard of her courage. Archie forgot the adventure, and her companion, and herself, in the bewilderment of new and vivid feelings which the sight of London awakened in her. Some dim sense of the pathos, the mystery, of this "mighty heart," broke, child as she was, across her intelligence, and held her lips silent, and suffused her eyes with tears. It was starlight now, and dome, and spire, and distant minster, lifted their shadowy shapes of delicate silver-grey against the purple arch of sky; along the river-side the quiver of innumerable lamps showed forth in fitful relief the gloomy outlines of the wharves and houses; a chaos of reflection was painted blood-red and luminous upon the inky "highway of the world" beneath. As Archie stood and gazed around her she felt a sudden realization of what life is; life with all its limitless powers of suffering and of happiness. Ah, what sorrow, she felt, what sorrow, what love, what patient endurance, what tragic passions of all kinds, must be stirring in these millions of human hearts amidst which she stood, a foolish girl who had never suffered, never loved, never lived, save in play! Her breath came quickly; she dropped her companion's arm, leant her breast against the cold stone parapet of the bridge, and sighed; a vague yearning for life, and all that life unfolds, even its misery, stirring her heart as with an actual pain.

"You sigh, Miss Wilson," said Gerald. "You are tired out at last. Take my arm and let us turn back to the station. There isn't very much to be seen here after all, is there?"

"I beg your pardon," she cried, with a start. "I—I don't think I could have heard you right."

He repeated his words, and Archie was shocked at their common-place sound. "Not much to see! How can there be more? I never saw anything so great before in my life."

"No? Did you never see any large cities by gaslight in Italy?"

"Yes; but I was a child then, and English people did not live in them. I feel here"—her voice faltering with one of its subtle, wonderful inflections—"as if I had brothers and sisters for the first time in my life."

Mr Durant smiled at her eagerness. "You should see Paris on a fête-day if you are so fond of lamplight effects. You wouldn't think much of London, if you had seen the Champs Elysées and the Tuileries illuminated."

After which Archie spoke no more to him of what she felt. With her father she could have lingered here, she felt, for hours; interchanging ever and anon a quaint fancy, or hazarding a wild suggestion, as their custom was together. From Gerald she felt that she was very far apart. He could dance with her, laugh with her, sentimentalize with her. At this moment, when noble longings, fresh enthusiasm, stirred her heart, Mr Durant stood in a different world to hers.

She took his arm as he told her, and they went on, at her wish, to the farther end of the bridge, then crossed, so as to have a different view of the city on their way back. The pavement was not so densely crowded here; and as they walked slowly along, Archie happened to notice a woman's figure crouched away in a corner of one of the recesses, and with her hand sunk down against the wall at her side. "Look, Mr Durant," she whispered, "is that woman ill? See the way she crouches there, in that thin dress, and with nothing round her. Let me speak to her."

"Good God, no, Miss Wilson!" exclaimed Gerald, quickly. "We are not in Morteville, remember. No one ever speaks to people in London."

"Not if they are ill?"

"Oh, she is not ill. No one ever is ill. Let us come on, please."

But Archie held obstinately back. "I am sure that woman is ill—I know it from the look of her hands—do you think I've seen no sick people abroad, ever? Ill, and in that dress, poor soul! Mr Durant, do you think it would be dishonest for me to give her

this cloak? I really want to get rid of it—it's so hot, and it would never do for me to land in Morteville in things that don't belong to me."

"Then please leave it at the station, or throw it, if you prefer, into the Thames. You *cannot*, really, speak to people of this kind." And he drew her on, sorely against her will, for four or five steps.

But then Archie made a resolute stop, and with a quick movement unhooked her cloak and transferred it from her shoulder to her arm. "Mr Durant, please, I would rather give it to her. Is it because you think it dishonest you won't let me?"

"Certainly not. The cloak, to begin with, is worth nothing, and you can never get it back to its rightful owner. It is—Miss Wilson, I cannot tell you why you must not do these charitable things in London. Pray be guided by me. It would never do for you to speak to people of that sort."

"People of what sort?"

He hesitated. "People who go to sleep in the recesses on London Bridge."

"Miserable people, in short?"

"Yes, that is one way of putting it. The woman—well, not to speak sentimentally, the woman is most probably 'overtaken'—only you don't know what that is—and will no doubt be in the kindly charge of the police before very long."

"But my speaking to her wouldn't make me be 'overtaken,'" persisted Archie; bringing out this unconscious condensation of all Christian charity, with the quiet pertinacity that was peculiar to her. "Come, Mr Durant, you are not very much in earnest about it. I can tell by your face you don't mind letting me have my own way!"

Any persistent human being, right or wrong, could have his way with Gerald; and Archie in another minute had turned, and was bending over the sunken figure in the recess. Gerald stood three or four yards from her, no nearer. His nature shrank from everything sick or miserable or repulsive. He would give other people, who asked it of him, money for such objects, if he happened to have money in his pocket. To go near them, to look, voluntarily, at ugliness; to touch a squalid hand; feel the impure breath of

lost lips like these, were duties that did not at all lie within the scope of his philosophy.

Miss Lovell bent over the poor unconscious wretch, and spoke to her; spoke with the honeyed sweetness of true womanly compassion; and the girl raised her head a little and silently stared at her. Her figure was turned away from the pavement, so that Gerald could only catch an outline of her face in profile, but Miss Lovell could see it full. It was a fine face, she thought; haggard and full of misery, but with a pale pure skin, and handsome, clear-cut features. What horrible accident, she marvelled, could have brought a girl, scarce older than herself, to be abroad alone at this hour, and in such a place!

"You must be chill, sitting here. Will you take this cloak, please? I don't want it—I should be glad for you to take it, dear."

Still no answer; only when Archie had put the cloak round her shoulders—herself stooping to fasten it—the girl's lips parted, and in a strange, hoarse voice, a voice from whence the very ghost of youth and womanhood seemed flown, tried to thank her.

Archie drew ever so little away at the sound. "Can I do anything more for you?" she said. "You'll be warmer now, I think, but I would like to do something more for you before I go."

But the woman made no answer; only with a sort of groan sank her head down low between her hands: perhaps the two or three mechanical syllables she had uttered had exhausted the last of human speech, of human consciousness, that was left to her: and Archie, with a disappointed conviction that Mr Durant's way of viewing the matter had been, at least, a practical one, returned to his side.

She saw to her surprise that there was a troubled, softened expression upon his face. "Mr Durant, how grave you look," she whispered. "Are you really annoyed with me still for my obstinacy? I don't think I have done either harm or good. The poor creature seems to be beyond feeling want or hunger, or any other pain now."

Instead of replying at once, Gerald stood and continued to gaze with a sort of fascination at the crouching figure, whose face was now entirely hid from him again. He had seen one turn of the profile, and Maggie Hall's face in a moment had come before him.

Maggie! why the very thought of her being there was monstrous. Robert's wife, wherever she was, must be living at least in common comfort; and this was a miserable outcast of the London streets! He did not walk up to the woman's side, bid her raise her face, and so put doubt at an end at once, because want, and disease, and squalid vice, were, as you know, intensely repugnant to him; and Gerald Durant never voluntarily made a movement in the direction of any distasteful duty. He continued to watch her only; vaguely remembering the fresh-faced girl he used to meet among the lanes at Heathcotes; and a pitying, sentimental regret crossed his heart as he marvelled how this lost wretch could, in the depths to which she had fallen, wear the print of beauty like poor Maggie's still! And then—then he did what was much more congenial to him than thinking of unpleasant subjects, or unhappy people of any kind: felt the touch of Archie's hand upon his arm again, and turned away with a laugh—a laugh, and one of the childish jests they were accustomed to have together, in the direction of the station.

God knows if the wanderer heard and recognized his voice! To this hour Gerald Durant looks back with a feeling of remorse to the possibility. Not that the responsibility of anything that happened that night burthens his conscience. Because he saw, or fancied he saw, a chance likeness to Maggie in this stranger's face was no reason he should have gone up and spoken to her. He made it a rule never to interfere in any painful circumstances whatsoever; and really the whole affair, from first to last, concerned him not. It is not this. It is the cruelty—let me use the right word—it is the ill-breeding of having jested in the hearing of a dying woman that haunts him!

Just as they were starting on their way again, the city clocks struck the quarter past ten; and Gerald told Miss Lovell that they must walk on quick. "We have been trying to say good-bye for nine hours!" he remarked; "but it is none the less hard to say now that the time for parting has come in earnest. In ten minutes more I shall be standing alone, looking after the train that takes you from me. I deserved nothing better, Archie," he added, tenderly. "I don't complain. I'm not selfish enough to wish your life to be mixed up, in any way, with such a life as mine!"

At which confession the tears rushed hotly into Miss Lovell's eyes, and her hand rested more heavily than it had done before, upon his arm. A woman never knows, perhaps, how much she *might* have liked a man, until she hears definitely that he is nobly prepared to relinquish her.

They had not much more opportunity for conversation of any kind now. The station was one dense crowd of night-mail passengers, porters, and luggage, on their arrival, and Gerald had only just time to get Miss Lovell's ticket and hurry her away into the train before the second bell rang.

"You are all right, now," he said, standing upon the step of the carriage as he spoke, and holding her hand in his. "You won't forget to write—no, to send the newspaper—telling me that you got home safe?"

"And—and, Mr Durant," she whispered, "how much money do I owe you, please? Forty-two shillings and a sixpence, is it not? Yes, I am sure it is. I have counted every time you paid anything for me. I will send it as soon as I know of any one going to London."

"And make me feel you never want to have anything more to do with me," said Gerald. "Wait for all reckoning up of accounts until we meet again, Archie, and then, if the balance is in my favour, pay me."

"Till we meet again—" So far she repeated his words: then her voice broke down, and Gerald Durant felt the greatest difficulty in the world to let her hand go coldly. But the eyes of two grim old ladies, the other occupants of the carriage, were upon them, and the guard was standing, his key already in the lock of the door, and so, perforce, he had to step down on the platform and leave her without more demonstration.

Another hand-pressure, another "Good-bye, Archie," from him. A little brown face, wet with tears, held out to take a last silent look at him as the train moved—

And then the fairest episode of all Gerald Durant's life was over. Archie had left him.

CHAPTER XVII.

"PLAY, OR TAKE MISS?"

It was eleven o'clock, and the little dinner-party in the Temple was going off in the cordial pleasant manner Robert Dennison loved. Loo was being played with spirit; young Sholto McIvor had already lost to a very considerable amount, the other guests were still much in the same position as when they started, and the host was in better spirits than his friends remembered to have seen him in for months. There were two reasons for his being so; first, a vague sensation, a sensation he would not have cared perhaps to define, that he was not going to have very much annoyance with regard to Maggie; secondly, the knowledge that he was in the society of four very young men, all able to pay their losings, and all ready to play until daylight next morning: the kind of men, in short, destined by a benign providence to replenish the purses of poor clever fellows like himself when they chanced to be empty, as was the case with his own at present.

Now, in saying this, I neither say nor infer that Robert Dennison ever played unfairly. It was, on the contrary, his habit to show a punctilious, occasionally a chivalrous, adherence to every written rule of honour in his dealings with his adversaries. The way in which he made cards pay was by selecting fools for his companions: and the only sleight-of-hand, the only sorcery he employed, was that which wins in many other games as well as the game of loo—brains.

It is a fact not invariably recognized, a fact that if recognized might save a good many persons from ruin, that at games of chance, as much as at any other human employment, intellect carries the day against stupidity; science against ignorance. And I do not here speak of the recognized rules of play which any man save a Sholto McIvor may learn by rote,—I speak simply of the power of observation and of memory, which in a clever and constant player become, after due apprenticeship, a species of intuition or second-sight. Any man who can remember sequences, who can

of the juxtaposition of the cards he takes up to shuffle, and the guess with tolerable certainty where they are placed after the cut, can give an ordinary adversary five points out of twenty, at least. Robert Dennison had a lightning-quick eye, an adroit hand, an almost unerring memory, an adamant face, and an admirable faculty for reading the faces of other people. Sholto McIvor and lads of his stamp stood about as much chance of winning from him, in the long run, as infants of six would have if they played with a very knowing old schoolboy of twelve or thirteen for marbles. And yet such men, when their money was gone, would steadfastly assert that luck had been against them, or that their heads had been heated by wine while his was cool, *et cetera*. No man believed Robert Dennison to play unfairly, and no man said it of him. They only failed to perceive that, while he did not aid chance by dishonesty, he governed it—a much more fatal antagonism as far as they were concerned—by science.

The party was going off admirably. Clouds of the excellent tobacco, for which Dennison was famed, made the room fragrant, but not close, for all the windows were wide open, and a freshness that scarcely seemed of the city came in across the Temple Gardens from the river. Every one was in pleasant temper, and Robert Dennison himself had just been loo'd (for an inconsiderable amount) for showing a card, when a loud knock and ring came at his chambers' door.

Mr Dennison's face changed colour as he got up hastily from the table; a vision rising before him of his wife, no longer gentle but desperate, coming in straight among them and denouncing him before his friends. "Excuse me a moment," he said, addressing them generally; "we won't be bored by any interruption, and this can't be any one I want to see. I'll tell Andrew to say no one is here, and—"

The handle of the door turned, and his cousin Gerald walked in. At any other time Dennison would have been intensely annoyed by the interruption; for no man coming in with a cool unheated brain can be said to be an addition to a party of men already excited by wine and play. But, in his intense relief at *not* seeing Maggie, he almost felt that he was glad to see any one else. "Here in time, old fellow, after all!" he cried, wringing his

cousin's hand heartily. "In time for everything but dinner, t. to say. Charteris, Drury, Broughton—you know everybody he I think?"

"I don't see them at present," said Gerald. "I daresay I shal know them when I do. Hallo, Sholto," he added, as his eyes got gradually accustomed to the mingled light and smoke; "you here?" and coming across the room he shook hands and exchanged greetings with young McIvor, with a warmth not thoroughly pleasant to Robert Dennison to contemplate.

"If I had thought there was really a chance of your returning," he remarked, coming up with a certain fidgetiness of manner to the table,—as Gerald, after shaking hands with the other men, continued talking to Sholto—"if I had thought there was a chance of your returning, I would have ordered dinner later. As it is—"

"As it is, he's only in time to be in our way, and do no good to himself," interrupted young Sholto. "Come, Durant, and take a hand," he added, making room for Gerald at the table. "Take a hand, and change the luck. I'm beginning to lose most confoundedly already."

"Not for me, thanks," answered Gerald, laconically. "Loo is one of the heavy businesses of life, Sholto, and I'm tired to death —only came off a steamer an hour ago, as you may perceive. Go on with your game as if I was not here, and I'll look on or fall asleep, according to my fancy." Saying which he drew a lounging-chair from the window, and seated himself, not exactly close to Sholto McIvor, but where he could have an easy view of the lad's cards and of his play.

"And what will you take, Gerald?" asked Dennison, who had been narrowly examining his cousin's face and dress. "Claret, hock and seltzer, or what? Brandy, I should say, would be the liquor best suited to your state at present." Taking a decanter from the side-board, and standing it on a little table at Gerald's side: "Cold water, or seltzer, do you think? Seltzer is the best thing in the world, you know, after sea-sickness. I'm really concerned to see you looking so ill, my poor fellow," he added, with the half-pitying, half-chaffing tone in his voice that it generally pleased him to adopt when he was speaking to his cousin. "I hope sea-sickness alone is the cause of your looking so pale? None

of the usual heart-aches, Gerald? or, at all events, nothing worse than one of the usual ones?"

Instead of answering, Gerald poured out about a third of a tumbler of brandy, to which he added a very inconsiderable quantity of water, and drank it off.

"A cure for heart-ache!" cried out young McIvor, with his boyish laugh.

"Sholto, my infant," said Gerald, gravely, "never give opinions on the actions of your elders. Confine your attention to whip-top, loo, and the things you really understand; and in everything else look at us and learn."

Sholto took the remark, as he took everything that occurred in the world around him, with wide-open eyes, a loud laugh, and a total want of understanding. Robert Dennison went back silently to his place. "If any one cares to go on, that is to say," he observed, glancing round the table as he re-seated himself. "As the game is broken up there is not much use, perhaps, in beginning it again. Gerald, you prefer conviviality to cards, I know. Shall we give up loo for this evening? I am quite ready, if the rest are; and you shall sing us the 'Wine-Cup' to cheer our fainting spirits for the night."

'When the wine-cup is sparkling before us,' was the after-dinner song for which Gerald was famous among his friends (as I write I hear his sweet voice lending itself to that brightest of all Moore's melodies! I see his fair boyish face flushing as it used to flush when he sang!): and every man present seconded in earnest the proposal that Mr Dennison, who detested singing as much as he detested conviviality, had made in banter.

"Break up your game or not, Robert," Gerald answered, quickly; "but don't ask me to sing. I'm not in a mood for conviviality of any sort to-night."

"Well, if you don't mean to be convivial, I don't see why we should break up our game," cried Sholto McIvor, upon whom the first fever of loo was at its height: and some one else echoing the opinion, Mr Dennison, very indifferently it seemed, took up the cards.

"I forget whose deal it was, and everything," he remarked. "Some one had just been loo'd for doing something extraordinarily stupid, I believe. Who was it?"

After exerting his brain a little, Mr Dennison could be brought to recollect that it was himself who had been loo'd for this extraordinary stupidity; also that it was now his deal; and then the game went on—Gerald Durant sitting silently smoking in a position from whence, as I have said, he could see Sholto McIvor's hand and form his own conclusions as to the style of game that young gentleman played.

After two or three deals, he saw, as he had expected to see, that Sholto played like a baby—the more utterly recklessly the more he lost; also that his money, with some occasional deviations, was steadily flowing into Robert Dennison's hands. And Gerald's blood rose at the sight!

"Not Sholto McIvor," he had said to Dennison when the finding of a man to fill his place had been discussed between them at Morteville; "any one but Sholto." And although Dennison had answered, carelessly, that he had no taste for Sholto, "or for any children," an uneasy foreboding that poor Sholto would, in the end, be asked, had haunted him ever since, and was the cause, mainly, of his being in his cousin's chambers now.

Any one but Sholto!

Breaking Quixotic lances on behalf of people unable to defend themselves was, ordinarily, not at all one of Gerald Durant's foibles. If young persons, in general, chose to ruin themselves through cards, or any other short and pleasant process, why they were doing very much as he had done; and, considering what a bore life is on the whole, who should say they were not gainers by getting a year or so of real amusement before they came to grief? But as regarded Sholto, his usual easy philosophy shifted singularly. Incapable though Gerald Durant was of very exalted or passionate love, he was capable, on rare occasion, of very true and very strong friendship: a feeling more common, perhaps, than love among all men of his class. When he left Eton, Fergus McIvor, Sholto's elder brother, left it with him. They got their commissions in the Guards in the same week, started their new bright life as emancipated schoolboys—fledgling Guardsmen—together, and loved each other unlike the way most brothers love.

The taint of gambling ran through every member of the McIvor family. In Fergus the hereditary latent germ developed itself into

active disease. At the end of four years he had run through every shilling of his patrimony, and had put his hand to bills for some thousands which he knew right well it would never be possible for him to meet; was ruined, in short, irretrievably. Then he shot himself. About an hour before his death he was with Gerald, and took leave of him, telling him he was going abroad. "And take care of Sholto," he added, his hand clasped in his friend's; "and, if you can, see that the boy doesn't make such a mull of it all as I have."

Sholto had then newly joined the regiment, and from that time till the present, more than a year and a half, Gerald had watched him faithfully. The lad's fortune was a limited one, with no future prospect of increase, and, unfortunately, was in his own possession now. There was thus every likelihood of his running the same course as his brother, only perhaps a somewhat shorter one, inasmuch as he possessed a smaller amount of money to get rid of. But Gerald was the most unwearying, the most vigilant of mentors. Sholto was the one sole charge of his life, he was accustomed to say, and into that charge he threw all the weight of energy that would have been frittered away into nothing if he had fulfilled the ordinary duties of a citizen. And, jesting apart, it was really no slight responsibility this watching of a baby guardsman of twenty-one. With a heart as open as his blue eyes, a temper impossible to ruffle, and a character for truthfulness not always found in very simple people, Sholto was yet one of the most difficult human creatures conceivable to manage. Whatever his mentor in plain language told him, he would believe and act upon: when it was requisite to get him through any delicate or complex position, hints, suspicions, innuendoes, were as much thrown away upon poor Sholto, as a blow from a lady's gloved hand would be upon a very boisterous, very stupid Newfoundland puppy.

If Gerald, before he left town, had said to him, "My cousin, Robert Dennison, is not a safe man to play at cards with; don't go if he asks you," Sholto would have obeyed unquestioningly, and probably would have imparted his own suspicions of Dennison's honour to five or six intimate friends the next time he had taken a point more of wine than was good for him. What Gerald had said was: "Don't lose your money faster than you can help while

I am gone, Sholto; and, whatever you do, don't play at loo. I've seen a good deal of it—at Dennison's chiefly—and it isn't a winning game for youngsters, take my word for it." And this warning being much too delicately worded to sink into poor Sholto's brain, he had accepted the first invitation given him by Mr Dennison, and was now playing loo in as "pleasant" a spirit as any man could possibly show under the circumstances.

And Gerald's blood rose at the sight!

Robert Dennison had made a good thing often before out of men to whom he had himself introduced him, as he had done to Sholto. But those for the most part were Philistines, calico young men, or usurers' sons, or something of that kind—the people one meets among the Guards now; and Gerald could never divest his mind of the idea that their spoliation to a certain extent was rightful. But with Sholto McIvor it was far otherwise. Sholto was the son of a poor Scottish widow—the brother of his own dead friend! And sitting there, watching the lad's flushed face as he pushed one "I.O.U." after another across the table to Dennison, Gerald Durant resolved within himself that the little game should stop.

He was loth exceedingly to risk a quarrel with Dennison—the more so at this time, when he believed him to be in trouble about that secret marriage of his; but he would rather have made Dennison his enemy for life than have quietly watched Fergus McIvor's brother losing money that he could in no legitimate manner pay. And he did it.

Sholto was seated on his host's left hand, and the deal was at the present moment again with Dennison; Sholto, consequently, was eldest hand. He had lost with little variation during the hour or so that Gerald had watched the game; and a quiver of irrepressible excitement was on his lips as Dennison finished dealing and looked at him. There was a very heavy loo in the pool, an amount which, if he won it, would go a good way towards pulling him round again, and if he lost it—but the young simpleton did not ask himself what the consequences would be of *that*.

"Well, McIvor, what do you do?" said Dennison, holding "miss" out carelessly, and with his usual half-smile at the corners of his mouth, but with no smile in his eyes. "Play, or take miss?"

Now in using these four words there is, as everybody knows, not the faintest deviation from fair dealing; "play, or take miss?" being as much a formula at loo as "cards" or "how many?" at écarté. But in the tone in which Robert Dennison uttered them to this boy there was, and Gerald felt there was, a tangible, an infinite unfairness. The science of loo more than of any other game resides in caution. Only in the brightest vein of luck, and scarcely then, would a good player take "miss" with four undeclared hands against him. And Sholto scarcely knew the rules of the game! And the tone of Dennison's voice conveyed to his weak brain that one of these two courses was incumbent upon him: that the possible alternative of throwing up his hand and risking nothing did not exist!

He seized his cards up tremblingly, and Gerald pushed his chair an inch or so nearer to see them clearly. Ten of trumps; knave of clubs; two of clubs: not cards to keep if they had been playing for halfpence. Sholto's lips quivered more and more, as he looked hesitatingly at Dennison's face, and he half moved his hand out across the table.

"Play, or take miss?" repeated Mr Dennison, suavely. "Now, McIvor, which is it?"

"*What* is it, you mean," remarked Gerald, speaking for the first time since he had been watching them, and in a slow, distinct manner, impossible to misconstrue: "'which' implies a choice between playing or taking miss only. McIvor need do neither."

A dead silence on the remark; then Robert Dennison spoke in an unruffled voice, and with perfect courtesy of manner:—

"What do you do, McIvor, as my cousin insists upon such accurate grammar? Do you take miss or not?"

"No," said poor Sholto, throwing up his cards desperately, "I don't. I don't play."

Neither did the next man, nor the next: sudden caution seemed to have grown contagious: the last player, Broughton, took "miss," and finding that it contained king of trumps, and ace, queen of spades, felt extremely cheerful for a minute, towards Gerald.

For a minute: then, knowing that the dealer was but defending the pool, and flushed by the excellence of his hand, he played, as young players will, for every trick instead of insuring one, and put

down his king of trumps. Robert Dennison took up his cards and calmly produced the ace; then the two and three of hearts, and Mr Broughton was loo'd to the amount of three hundred and seventy odd pounds.

Up to the present moment the pleasant temper Mr Dennison loved had prevailed; but now with an oath Broughton struck his hand down on the table. Such luck, he cried, as his was never seen before! king of trumps, ace, queen of spades, and to be loo'd by such beggarly cards as those!

"If you had played a spade you would have made two tricks," remarked Dennison, quietly. "You had a magnificent playing hand."

"Yes," returned the other, "that's all very well now you see the cards, but what man living would not have played as I did? You Charteris, you Durant," appealing excitedly round the table, "what would you have done?"

Thereupon arose a Babel of opinions: every man stating what he considered to be right, and the majority siding with Broughton as to the correctness of his play.

"And you, McIvor," said Dennison, turning to Sholto. "What is your opinion about it?"

Sholto was sitting silent, his eyes and mouth wide open, gazing at the cards upon the table. A fresh world had suddenly opened before the young man's intelligence. Here in plain fact was demonstrated to him that which Gerald had so often and so vainly striven to prove, namely, that luck is not everything at loo; that a man with a hand like Broughton's may lose every trick by playing the card which four men out of five called it right to play! I say a fresh world had suddenly opened before Sholto's sight; and, under the embarrassing influence of something like an idea of his own, utterance, for about the sole time in his life, failed him.

"What do you think, McIvor?" repeated Dennison. "Let us have all your opinions as to which is the right play."

And then the first wise speech Sholto McIvor had ever yet made left his lips. "I don't know, Dennison. I know nothing at all about it!" winding up after a minute of profound thought, "but I see there's a great deal more play and—and that—than I ever knew of before in loo."

After which he rose from the table, feeling his body no doubt exhausted by this unwonted pressure of intellect, and going to the sideboard helped himself to brandy and soda and a fresh cigar.

"And your deal," cried Dennison, cheerfully. "When you're ready; we're waiting for you, McIvor."

"No, thanks," said Sholto, "I've done; I've lost as much as is good for me. I shan't play any more—that is to say—" but here he looked at Gerald's face, and reading approbation of his words, grew bolder again. "I'm on duty to-morrow, you see, Dennison, and it's late already. I must ask you to excuse me this time; and—I've lost as much as is good for me."

"As you like, as you like," said Dennison, indifferently; "don't play a minute longer than you choose. Our game does not break up, of course?" addressing the other men. "Four is as good a number as five any day."

Broughton was sitting, his face as white as a sheet, thinking of what he had lost. He was quite a young fellow, hardly older than McIvor, a clerk in the Treasury, with a salary of one hundred and fifty pounds a year, and an allowance of about as much more from his father, an old general officer, living at Exeter with five unmarried daughters, and with neither means nor inclination to help his sons out of their gambling debts.

"If you'll excuse me, Dennison, I believe I ought to follow McIvor's example. As it is," he leaned across and whispered into Dennison's ear, "I must ask you to take a bill. That last loo was a heavy one, and just at present—"

"To be sure, to be sure, my dear fellow," interrupted Dennison; "you need not speak of it. Manage it just as it suits you best. But of course we do not leave off playing," he added, aloud. "Nothing I dislike so much as leaving off a winner in my own house, and the luck never goes long in one direction at loo."

The two men who had as yet neither won nor lost to any great extent were ready to go on; and young Broughton, desperately recollecting that he had no more means of paying three hundred pounds than seven, and that the present, at all events, was the worst possible time for him to leave off, said: "Yes, let the game go on." And so it was decided.

"And we may as well be off, Sholto," said Gerald, "if you have

decided to go. The same cab can take us both to Clarges Street."

"Like two good little boys, told to be back in proper time," added Dennison, looking into Gerald's face for the first time since that interruption of his with regard to grammar. "How delightful it is, Gerald, to see you in your new character of Mentor! The moral and mental guide of youth; it suits you so exactly!"

There was a marked emphasis on the word "mental," but Gerald kept his temper admirably.

"A case of the blind leading the blind, certainly," he answered; "but 'tis the way of human nature. There was a time when you tried to put me through moral training once, Robert."

"Long ago, I am sure!" retorted Dennison. "Yours are all very safe kind of sins, Gerald. Not sins to alarm the most scrupulous cousin or maiden aunt living!"

"They are not the errors of burning my fingers with things I know nothing about," said Gerald, calmly. "That is the indiscretion from which I try to keep Sholto, poor infant! when I can."

Every man at once exchanged a half-look with his neighbour, and Robert Dennison saw it, and the evil red glow came into his dark eyes.

"Burning your fingers, eh, Gerald! Well, that's a figure of speech, you see, and I am too common-place to follow you high-flown, sentimental people. If you had said getting your coat torn to pieces, and running about, minus a hat, at midnight, I might have understood you better."

The altercation had now taken a practical turn, which placed it within the grasp of Sholto McIvor's intellect.

"Your coat torn, Durant? By George, so it is!" he exclaimed; "and your hat gone, eh? or did you leave it outside?"

"No," answered Gerald, quietly still; "I came here without it. I lost my hat on London Bridge, where I also had my coat torn in a row. Does any man want to ask me any more questions?"

"Well," said Dennison, with a sneer, "it would be too much, I suppose, to inquire who your companion was while these remarkable events transpired?"

Gerald remained silent, but his temper was rising fast, and he

looked steadily, and with a singularly set expression, into his cousin's face.

"Not Miss—Miss—what was it?" went on Dennison. "The little red-headed woman you and your friend Waters were running about after at Morteville? Wilton—Willis—what was it?"

Gerald Durant had taken a cigar from his case while Dennison was speaking; he bit the end off with mathematical exactness, and lighted it; took two or three calmly critical inhalations as if to test the flavour, then he spoke. For a minute the angry blood had dyed his fair face scarlet: he was pale now, and his words came from him slow and distinct, as the manner of some men is when they are under the influence of passion.

"I don't think you know any ladies of my acquaintance well enough to be familiar with their names, Robert, so no wonder you are rather inaccurate at times. What friend of yours—a lady, too—do you suppose I saw, or fancied I saw, upon London Bridge to-night?"

"Oh, I—I have nothing to do with ladies," exclaimed Dennison, shuffling about the cards, and for an instant horribly disconcerted by this unexpected blow. "I've nothing to do with running after young ladies. I leave that to men like you—and Waters!"

"Well, the face I saw was a Staffordshire face," said Gerald. "A Staffordshire face (very wan and white now) that you and I knew well, or one so like it as to be its ghost, crouching away from men's eyes in a recess on London Bridge. Of course it couldn't be the one we knew, Robert; it could be nothing but a chance resemblance; but for a moment the sight of that face sickened me, I can assure you."

"A—a Staffordshire face!" said Robert, keeping his own with marvellous self-command: but the cards dropped from his hands. "I don't know what you are talking of."

"All right," returned Gerald, coldly. "Perhaps when you think matters over, you may chance to light upon some clue to the enigma. Good-night, Drury; good-night, Charteris—Broughton. Now, Sholto, are you ready?"

And, without stopping to shake hands with any one, Gerald Durant walked away out of the room, followed by Sholto, who was

dimly conscious that he had been the cause of something disagreeable, and was vacillating within himself as to whether he ought to offer apologies to his host or demand them.

It was the last time but one that Gerald Durant ever crossed his cousin's threshold.

During all the remainder of that night, from the first deal after the departure of Gerald and Sholto until they left off with the bright summer morning shining in upon them, the cards went steadily against Robert Dennison. He was not a loser on the whole; twenty or thirty pounds of his winnings still remained to him. But twenty or thirty pounds, after sitting up all night with men like these, was not the kind of sum Mr Dennison proposed winning: and long after his guests were gone, he stood, with folded arms, beside his open window, gazing out into the Temple Gardens, and moodily thinking over all that the last twelve hours had brought to him: his wife's visit; Gerald's inopportune return and altered manner; young Sholto McIvor's abrupt departure; his own failing luck.

He had not a grain of superstition in his nature. No belief did he hold save in himself: his own quick brain, his own strong arm. Life to him was like loo; a game to be turned aside, certainly, by the temporary accumulation of accidents men call luck, but in which perseverance and ability must, in the long run, win perforce. So now, no foreboding of the spirit, no sinking of the heart, overcame him. He simply thought. Sholto McIvor—he dismissed the least important subject first—was lost: but other Sholto McIvors might easily be found. Gerald, he could see, would never be present at another card party in his house. Well, Gerald, in his time, had bled pretty freely, and had introduced him to a great many good things in Guardsmen, and the like. You can expect no mine to last for ever: Gerald, as regarded cards, had been worked well. Now came the thought of Maggie, and of those words of his cousin's that fitted in with such dread significance concerning her. Robert Dennison thought of her as he saw her last night: the marble lips laid down to press his pillow; the cold hands clinging round his neck; the good-bye of the clammy lips; the half-threats that she was going where she would trouble him no more! All these he accurately remembered:

and then, in weird juxtaposition, Gerald Durant's words sounded in his ears. A wan woman's face—a Staffordshire face they both knew well, crouching in one of the recesses of London Bridge. They had been intended, possibly, as an idle taunt: might they not, in reality, prove to be the first whisper of an awful truth?—the first news of a burthen taken away from him?—darkly, horribly taken away: but *taken!*

Every appliance of bachelor comfort was to be found in Robert Dennison's rooms: an admirable apparatus for making coffee among them of course. It stood ready on the sideboard now: the coffee and water measured ready for the one inordinately-strong cup that it was Mr Dennison's habit to take at hours like these.

He was a man who habitually, and on principle, did with little sleep—the spending of needless hours in inanition seeming a stupidity to him; and, after sitting up at cards all night, was accustomed to take a cup of strong coffee, then get out his books and papers and work, instead of going to bed, when daylight came.

He was not fit for work on this particular morning; but he was less fit still for sleep. So he made his coffee, took out his narghili and tobacco—more excellent even than he gave his friends—and exchanged his evening attire for a dressing-gown and slippers. Then he drew his most luxurious arm-chair beside the window; put his feet up on another; and with the fragrant coffee and his tobacco-pouch on the table by his side, set himself to think again.

The morning sun shone in upon him thus: shone red on his pale, keen, untired face; on his white, ringed hand, as it rested on his cashmere dressing-gown; on his embroidered velvet slippers (Maggie's work); on the *débris* of cards and expensive wines still standing on the table. Shone red, too, on the river—fresh and transparent as even the London Thames can look in the light of an August morning like this.

It was low tide now; and numbers of men and boys—dredgermen, rat-catchers, sewer-gropers, and the like human creatures that extract a living, God knows how! out of the mud and refuse of the river—were already at their work, Robert Dennison noticed. He watched them and thought of what their work was: thought how secrets of shame, and sin, and despair must come to light

occasionally in these early summer mornings! How, at this very hour, the red sun might be resting on some ghastly burden of the river—here, close at hand among the London shipping, or far away among the silent marshes; in the pleasant freshness of the country, with the birds singing, and the sedges waving on the banks.

Mr Dennison did not philosophize; he did not sentimentalize; neither did he regret or feel afraid in aught. He thought as a lawyer thinks over the bare facts that were in his possession; and the few speculations he entered upon were wholly practical ones. If anything had happened (I write with more circumlocution than he thought) it would most likely be made known first in the evening papers. And they were published at four—more than ten hours, that is to say, from the present time.

He was not sentimental; he was not cowardly; and as to conscience—well, conscience he viewed in the light of a custom or superstition, which, varying in detail among different nations, is mainly of use in subordinating weak men to strong ones.

But in spite of this, in spite of all his callousness and all his scepticism, Robert Dennison shuddered as he pictured to himself how this intervening time, the eternity of these next ten hours, would pass!

CHAPTER XVIII.

AMONG THE PHILISTINES.

As soon as the train was fairly in motion, and Gerald Durant irrevocably parted from her, Miss Lovell burst into tears. No woman looks beautiful when she cries, but Archie's face was so soft and dimpled and childish, that she did not look very ugly, even with a red nose; and the two old maiden ladies, who were sitting at the other end of the carriage, regarded her kindly in her grief, and made up their minds that she was a school-girl, weeping innocently at parting from her brother after the holidays. What

would they have felt—how would they have looked—could they have known the atrocious truth? What anathemas would not their hearts have fulminated, could they have guessed that this fair-seeming, baby-faced young person had been running away from home, and that the man to whose hand she clung so tenderly at parting was a stranger? Happily, we none of us walk through the world with the story of our iniquities written upon our foreheads. Archie cried and rubbed her eyes till they were scarlet; then choked back her tears; then found that they would burst forth again, with a sob instead of silently; and the two old ladies looked at her with ever-increasing pity, and even exchanged speculations as to whether or not the girl was too old to have peppermint lozenges offered as an alleviation of her sorrow.

As long as they were surrounded by dingy London suburbs, Archie's eyes continued blind; but by the time the train reached Croydon she began to feel better; and then, remembering that there was no use in crying any longer, she wiped away the last tears resolutely from her eyes, and leaned her flushed face out in the fresh, cool country air. It was a brilliant night; one of those rare nights which, four or five times a year, bathe our English harvest-fields in light as lustrous as ever quivers upon the shores of the Adriatic. The air was so transparent that every object, for miles and miles around, could be seen distinctly in the ebon and silver pencilling of moonlight: the sky was as wonderful a blue as Archie had ever seen in Italy. Italy! the country about Croydon, in no wise, save in its flatness, resembles the Campagna; but just at that moment,—evoked by I know not what subtle train of associations—Rome, and the Roman days of long ago, flashed suddenly before the girl's vision. She was a little child again, walking home from the Prostestant burial-ground, her hand in her father's, through the ghostly Roman streets at night—often stopping as they walked for him to note some new effect of light or shade, or to polish aloud some grandiloquent lay of ancient Rome —never destined, alas, to eclipse Macaulay's! Then, even as she strove to recall its details more clearly, this picture faded and changed into another: of a summer night in Genoa, and she was in the garden of the Acqua Sola, looking across the sleeping city to where one glorious planet cast a broad white track upon the

tideless waters of the bay. This time it was not her father's hand she held. Her father was sitting apart from her, not speaking, she and Bettina and a third person, an Englishman, were together. Then she grew sleepy, she remembered, in the warm lemon-scented air, and her head sank down upon the Englishman's shoulder, and when she opened her eyes again, she found herself in his strong arms, being borne slowly away, in a delicious half-dream, through starlit thickets of oleander and vine to the villa Andreo, outside the city walls, where her father lived. The villa Andreo—as clear as if she had left it yesterday, the familiar old place, half palace, half farmhouse, seemed to rise before her in the moonlight. The mildewed inlaid stairs, the echoing rooms, where firewood was piled against the frescoed walls, and Indian corn was laid out to dry on marble floors, the broken fountain, the garden choked with weeds and red with roses, where she and Tino played! Vividly, with a mysterious sense of its being bound up with something she had done or seen to-day, Archie recalled it all: then, with a start, and a quick glance at her companions, to see if they were watching her face, her thoughts came suddenly back to the present, and all the adventures—adventures with no delightful gloss of excitement on them now—that lay before her. The crossing alone at night; the landing at Morteville; the chance of being seen by early loiterers on the pier; the return home, last, but by no means least, the suspicions and inquiries that, as a natural consequence, must follow when the dilapidated condition of Mrs Lovell's best parasol should be discovered. She never for one moment meant to hide from her father and Bettina the history of her journey; but to confess that she had, of malice aforethought, taken the French grey parasol—the lovely gift of Madame Bonnechose—with her, was, she felt, virtue superhuman, virtue beyond her strength. To have run away to London with Mr Durant seemed light compared with such guilt! and through many a long mile of her moonlit journey, Miss Lovell's face was set and overcast as she pondered over the possibility of cleaning silk with *eau de benzine;* of wrapping up the silver papers fold by fold, as Bettina wrapped them; finally, of bearing with cold unmoved face the horrible esclandre that must one day descend upon the household when this, her secret sin, should be dragged to light!

Her knowledge of the world may be more justly estimated by thinking of her thus, perhaps, than by any long description of her ignorance. Pondering over the soiled parasol when all the best part of her life, her childhood, her girlhood, her crown of fresh and pure repute had been tarnished—put away from her for ever by the mad escapade of the last ten hours!

The train stopped at Ashford for five minutes, and several of the passengers, with the usual restlessness of Englishmen, got out and paced up and down the platform. Archie put her head through the window—all traces of tears passed away—to look about her; and was much struck by the tempting aspect of the fruit on a refreshment stall nearly opposite her carriage. Great ripe plums—and she adored plums—apricots, rosy and golden, and other minor temptations. Would there be time before the train started for her to buy some? She put the question to her fellow-passengers and they answered yes; whereupon Miss Lovell got the door opened by the guard and ran across to make her purchases. A dozen plums? yes, for she must give some to the old ladies: and cherries? yes: and six apricots? and how much to pay?—gathering the fruit in her scarf, and already biting deep with her little white teeth into an apricot—how much to pay?

"Twelve plums, two shillings; six apricots, one shilling and sixpence; cherries, sixpence—four shillings altogether."

Four shillings: five francs: for about as much fruit as she could have bought in Morteville for twenty sous! Archie's face turned burning hot with shame. "I have bought more than I can pay for," she cried aloud, in Italian—a sure index, always, to the intensity of her emotions—and pulled out her poor little purse nervously. The coins it contained were two francs and a half; for Gerald had bought her through ticket to Morteville, and she had steadfastly refused to borrow more of him. These she tendered; and these the refreshment woman, after scornfully subjecting them to the light, returned. She never took foreign money of any kind.

"Now, gentlemen, take your places!" cried the guard's voice at this moment; and Archie's agony of mind reached its culminating point. She had four shillings' worth of fruit in her scarf, and had eaten one apricot, she had no available money, a stern English woman looking implacably impertinent in her face, and the train

was just about to start without her. Her heart had not beat with pain so intense at the moment when she had found herself going away from Morteville with Gerald. She had a companion, a protector, with her then. She stood alone at midnight, a miserable detected impostor in a foreign country, and among hard foreign faces, now.

"Take your places, gentlemen," reiterated the guard's voice impatiently.

Archie turned her face round in despair, and the man in the grey overcoat—the man who had brushed by her as she stood with Gerald outside the station in London—was at her side.

"The lady has no English money," he said, quite quietly, and as if it was the most natural commonplace thing that he should interfere. How much do you want? four shillings." And in a minute, before Archie could think sufficiently to say yes or no, the money was paid; and then, half through the agency of the guard, half through that of the man who had befriended her, she found herself in her place, the train once more in motion, and the two old ladies, her fellow-passengers, staring stonily at her and at the four shillings' worth of fruit that she was holding in her scarf.

She offered them each an apricot, the most odorous and ripe she could select, but they declined with pinched shakes of the head, with acid pursed-up lips. They had watched the whole scene at the refreshment stall; and had formed dark conclusions primarily from the young woman's want of money (that safest ground whereupon human beings may always found their belief in each other's worth); and secondly, from her allowing a stranger of the opposite sex to pay for her. Were they to condone such impropriety by partaking of these fruits?

A blank sensation fell on the child's heart at their rejection of her. "The people in England are Philistines, all of them," she thought bitterly. "First, all those men who stared at me in the London station, and now these cruel-eyed women refusing my fruit because I have not been introduced to them, or some such rubbish. I hate England—except when I am with Gerald! I hate all the people who live in it. Oh, the happiness of being in the Morteville steamer, and knowing that I'm going back to papa, and that I have done with England and the English for ever!"

And then, though she was in reality all but crying, Miss Lovell began to sing aloud: French songs, Italian songs, anything that came into her head; and she ate more fruit than was good for her, throwing the stones away with reckless rapidity through the window: then she put her feet up on the opposite seat, leaned back her head, and looked at her fellow-travellers with something of the expression she had been wont to assume towards Mesdames O'Rourke and Maloney at home.

The instincts of Bohemianism were deep-rooted, almost like religious convictions, in Archie's heart. Ever since she could think at all she had had a vague sense that respectability, Philistines, "grocers," and her father, were on opposite sides; consequently, that it was for her to do battle with respectability. Chemists tell us that between the basest substances and the most refined odours exist relationships near and subtle almost beyond their powers of analyzation. With slight transmutation the vile-smelling potato-spirit becomes possessed of delicious pine-apple fragrance; the horrible oil of gas tar is changed into the delicious "Essence de Mirbane." Is it only so in the material world that we can grossly test? Are not the moral, like the physical forces, so finely, so mysteriously poised, that circumstance alone can decide whether their affinity be for things good or evil, for pestilence and death, or for exquisite aroma and freshness? It was so at all events in Archie's case at this immature period of her life. Side by side with the germ of everything best and noblest—with hatred of shams, love of freedom, courage to uphold the principles or person she loved against the world—were the germs of obstinate rebellion, the possibility of utter alienation from right in the poor little girl's heart.

"Capable of anything, in short!" the two old ladies whispered to each other, as a final verdict upon her when the train was slackening speed outside Folkestone; and they were not far from the truth. Archie Lovell was capable of anything: if she had possessed a cigarette would at that moment have smoked it under their noses, regardless of them, and of the guard, and of the railway regulations alike. Capable of anything! It was for the future to decide what direction the good and the evil of her nature should take. As she sat now, with flushed face and careless attitude, and

defiant parted lips, showing her white teeth as she sang, I believe a great many persons of her own sex would have joined with the two old female Philistines in labelling her "Dangerous."

The crimson sunrise shone upon the amphitheatre of hills around Morteville when the mail packet arrived there, and early as it was the whole French population of the place seemed already astir; bouquet-sellers, shrimp-sellers, water-carriers, and not a few of the great Parisian ladies, going down in wonderful amphibious costumes to bathe. Miss Lovell cared for none of these people. What she mortally feared was being seen by any of her own countrywomen on her road home. The story of her flight must, she thought, be written—so plainly that an Englishwoman who ran might read it—upon her tumbled white dress, her grand parasol at this unearthly hour of the morning, her dishevelled hair, her wearied, travel-worn face! No English person, however, did she meet save Captain Waters, thirty or forty yards away from the end of the pier, and quite too far off, she fervently hoped, to have noticed her among the other passengers landing from the mail boat. Waters touched his hat as usual when they passed, giving her dress and herself no more apparent attention than if she had been walking with her father at noonday, and with a lightened heart, her first terrible fear of being seen over, Miss Lovell ran lightly on towards the Rue d'Artois. The *porte-cochère* of the house was already open, the portress not to be seen, the shutters of old Mrs Maloney's lodgings opposite were closed: everything was in her favour. With a quick and noiseless hand Archie unlocked and reclosed the outer door of their apartment, and in another minute, after stealing breathless and on tip-toe along the silent corridor, found herself once more safe in the little salon: her secret, thus far at all events, still in her own keeping.

The chair was standing where she had left it when she fastened the rose into her waist-belt yesterday; and mechanically Archie crossed the room and took her place before the glass. When she saw her own disordered image looking at her, a shocked, ashamed feeling made the blood rush up into her face. She felt as though months, years, rather than hours, must have passed by since she stood there last; smiling and neat and fresh, and saying to herself

what a pretty girl she was! She was no longer neat and fresh. Her face was tired and jaded, her hat was battered, her muslin scarf and dress bore the unmistakable crush and soil of steamers and London smoke and London pavements. Was the freshness gone from more than scarf and dress? Had that wild escapade, those long hours alone with Gerald Durant, taken the first ineffable bloom away from a heart that was a child's yesterday? Archie did not ask herself (no really innocent people ever enter upon speculations as to their own innocence); but she did wonder whether it would be possible for her to look so changed and old and for all the world not to find out her secret from her face? For Bettina and her father she cared little: the bare thought that Jeanneton, or the milkwoman, or the porter's wife, might suspect her of aught amiss, made her blood run hot and cold by turns: and recollecting that it was now broad day, and time for all the household to be astir, she ran to her own room to change her dress, and bathe some colour back to her tired face.

The porter's wife was the first person whom she saw. Madame Brun, a fat good-humoured old woman of fifty, the typical French portress, rang the bell of the *rez de chaussée* between seven and eight, and was quickly answered by mademoiselle in person; mademoiselle in her neat morning frock as usual, her face fresh and smiling, her wet hair hanging round her shoulders, a paint-brush and palette—Archie's first hypocrisy—in her hand; and immediately, with the unfailing readiness of her class and nation, Madame Brun took all further trouble in story-telling off Archie's hands. She had taken in mademoiselle's milk herself: was mademoiselle to be roused from her bed at six because Jeanneton, lazy good-for-nothing, chose to go holiday-making and leaving the poor little mademoiselle alone? She, Madame Brun, would have come in and offered her services yesterday, but just after she heard mademoiselle return in the afternoon—six o'clock it was, for she happened to remark the town clock strike at the time—some people came to look at the apartments on the fourth, and after that *et cetera, et cetera.* And when Jeanneton came back it was the same scene re-enacted. The women knew they had neglected the girl in her parents' absence; and in their anxiety to screen themselves screened her. Madame Brun had heard mademoiselle enter

the house yesterday at six by the town clock; Jeanneton was delighted to find from the state of the larder that mademoiselle had eaten well while she was alone. And mademoiselle's painting! Great heavens, how it had progressed since yesterday! How mademoiselle must have worked! There was the cock on the top of St Etienne's spire, and two ladies going in at the door to the offices, as natural as life.

And so when Mr and Mrs Lovell returned, such a Babel of falsehood greeted them before they crossed their threshold, as made Archie's part for the present an easy one to play. All that mademoiselle had felt, and thought, and eaten, and drunk—every unnecessary and circumstantial falsehood that could enter even into the heart of a French servant to conceive—did Jeanneton unhesitatingly tell. How mademoiselle had been a little lonely at first, but cheered up towards evening, and made an excellent supper (off the beautiful cold fillet, madame knew), and how they had gone to bed early to make the day seem shorter, and this morning mademoiselle rose with the sun and had been painting—but painting, so that monsieur would scarcely recognize her picture. All of which Archie, in inward hot indignation, had to condone, perforce, by her silence. It was the first time in her life that she had told her father a falsehood; and coming from Jeanneton's lips the falsehood seemed to lower her more in her own sight than it would have done had she told it boldly herself. She was too thoroughly honest, poor little sturdy Bohemian, to employ moral casuistry of any kind on behalf of her own conscience. A falsehood was a falsehood, and to act one was to tell one. Had she not spoken well when she told Gerald Durant that she was only half-civilized as yet?

On ordinary occasions, even after an absence of a day, Mr Lovell, the moment he returned, would bear his daughter off to his painting-room, and spend an hour at least in looking at her face, and listening greedily to all her little chatter concerning what had happened in his absence. And had he done so now, Archie's secret would infallibly have been told. But Mr Lovell had made unusually large and valuable purchases at the Amiens sale, and his bric-a-brac, the most fragile of all merchandise, was being now brought up by porters from the Morteville station. With a

newly-acquired *bonheur du jour* of Madame de Pompadour and a veritable Boule clock in perilous transition, even Archie, after his first kiss from her, was forgotten; and Bettina of course was far too eager to rush off to the kitchen and the larder on the scent of Jeanneton's possible knaveries, to bestow attention on Archie's heavy eyes and pale face. And so the first opportunity for confession passed by. "The *bonheur du jour* cost me six hundred francs, and will sell for three thousand," cried Mr Lovell, with kindling eyes. "If I could meet with bargains like this every day, child, our fortune would be made."

"Tea is six francs a pound, Archie, and you and Jeanneton have drunk a quarter of a pound since yesterday," said Bettina, putting her head in at the door; "I made a little mark on the caddy, to be sure. A franc and a half a day is ten francs and a half a week; forty-two francs a month—forty-two francs a month for tea alone! So much for your housekeeping, Archie."

Poor Archie after this stole away to her own bedroom, and there, seated at her window and gazing out into the street, she passed two or three of the first really desolate hours she had ever known. No one came to interrupt her: her father, without his coat, and covered all over with fragments of bass and straw like a gigantic Guy Fawkes, stood unswathing his cabinets and his clocks, tenderly as a nurse would unswathe a baby, in the court-yard; while Bettina was in the full fury of incoherent Anglo-Gallic battles with Jeanneton—who, to keep up the fable of mademoiselle's excellent appetite, and not unmindful of "son Pierre," had privately secreted goodly portions of all the eatables in the house.

"Old cabinets, and Madame de Pompadour, Jeanneton's sins, and my bad housekeeping!" said Archie, bitterly to herself. "These are the subjects of real vital importance in our household. Such a little affair as my having run away to London and back is nothing compared to them. Why, even the horrible man in grey took more interest in my concerns than they do."

She rose and leant her face out through the window just as she was giving utterance aloud to this small piece of childish injustice, and as she did so a sight met her which made the words die on her lips—the blood rush with suffocating oppression to her heart.

There, exactly opposite her window, and looking up over the door, evidently to find out the number of their house, stood the man himself! the well-known grey overcoat hanging upon his arm, his face, every line of which was impressed with distinctness upon her memory, upturned, so that Miss Lovell could see it plainly.

She drew back in an instant, and sank with trembling limbs upon a chair. This man had tracked her then, and had come to denounce her to her father. The story was to be told, softened by no explanation of hers, but by the cruel, unsympathizing lips of a stranger; of a man who had watched her alone with Gerald Durant in London, who had seen her fill her scarf with fruit that she had no money to pay for on her journey home! No sense of the improbability of a stranger taking such extraordinary interest in her or in her misdeeds struck her. A boy who has been robbing a cherry-orchard believes that every ploughman, every urchin he meets, must be on the road to denounce him to the farmer, and Archie had a similar overwhelming consciousness of her guilt and impending detection. She started back from the window, sank down trembling in her chair, and then, with bloodless cheeks and beating heart, awaited her doom: heard the porter's bell ring; heard Jeanneton's shrill tones in parlance with a stranger—a moment later heard the sound of a man's deep voice alternating with Bettina's and with her father's in the salon. The cold damps gathered thick on the poor little thing's forehead; her clasped hands turned to ice as they lay heavily on her lap. It seemed to her as though she lived through all her life anew during the agony of the next ten minutes. It was no new thing this waiting to be summoned into the presence of her awful enemy: it had happened all before, not once, but a score of times. A score? Was there any moment of her whole past life which had not been coloured with a ghastly prophetic on-coming of her present pain? In ten minutes the door of the salon opened, and the dead calmness of despair fell upon the girl's heart. She knew that her hour had come. A minute later, and Bettina entered the room, a strange flush on her faded face, her cap awry, a light that was not that of anger in her eyes.

"Archie, Archie, child," she cried, stammering with excitement,

and never noticing the whiteness of her step-daughter's face. "It has come at last."

"What has come?" said Archie, rising bravely to meet her fate, and never doubting that "it" must be the news of her own guilt. "Tell me at once, please. I can bear it."

"We have got a living at last—he was seventy-seven years of age, and read without spectacles till a fortnight ago, and your grandfather—time, I am sure—has awakened at length to his duty and given it us. Oh, Archie," melting into tears, "to think of his coming here at once to tell us! met Lord Lovell by accident in Piccadilly, and only back from India three days! and he says the rectory at Hatton isn't more than a mile from his own house."

"Who is he, and what is Hatton, Bettina? and has grandpapa or the man without spectacles come to tell us!"

"Hatton is your father's living, Archie; and heaven knows this is no time for levity! Four hundred a year, without the glebe, and Major Seton himself has come to tell us. He's going to leave the army, and we shall be near neighbours, and—"

"Major Seton!" In a second the past was all unlocked before Archie's sight—the clue given to her imperfect recollections of the stranger's face in London—to the confused dreams of Italy that had haunted her upon her moonlit journey. "Ralph, dear Ralph!"

Without waiting to hear another word, she rushed past Bettina out of the room; and a minute later her enemy, her denouncer, the mysterious man in grey himself, had seized her vehemently in his arms and was covering her face with kisses.

CHAPTER XIX.

OLD LOVE AND NEW!

"AHEM! She is not a little girl now, Major Seton," remarked Bettina, who had followed in time to watch the meeting, and who, even in the first blissful intoxication of being a rector's wife, could remember the proprieties. "Archie is seventeen, a grown-up girl,

and has been introduced into society already." An hour ago Bettina would have said "introduced at a Morteville ball," but with returning position had awakened the old instinctive euphemisms of the world.

"Seventeen—is it possible?" said the stranger. "Why, it seems only yesterday since she was a little girl—a little girl I could carry very conveniently in my arms about the garden at Genoa."

"But I am not a little girl now," cried Miss Lovell, hot and scarlet still after Major Seton's greeting of her. "I was seventeen the twelfth of last October."

"But very unlike a qualified, grown-up young lady still," Mr Lovell remarked, drawing the girl to his side, and giving her a look which plainly told how much better than any qualified young lady he thought her. "Archie has had strange companionship at times, and I am afraid will not be very much like a rector's daughter for awhile. Imagine, Ralph, the child has never been in England yet."

"Indeed" Major Seton stroked down his moustache thoughtfully at this information, and gave a side-long inquiring look at Archie's face. The blue eyes met his unflinchingly; the girlish figure stood up bravely, though every nerve was trembling with excitement, at Mr Lovell's side.

"He says nothing!" she thought at last, drawing a freer breath as Major Seton, to her intense surprise and relief, remained silent. "Is he shy, or stupid, or is it possible that he doesn't remember me? Perhaps he is as foolish about me as ever—poor dear old Ralph! and if he is, I can soon make him believe anything I choose."

And then she turned away, and artfully quitting the subject of her own foreign bringing-up, began to heap pretty congratulations upon her father: wondering what England would be like, and what his duties would be, and how many sermons he would have to write a week—holding her soft cheek against his forehead, and caressing the hair back from his temples just as, years ago, she used to caress Ralph himself when she was a child playing among the roses in the ruined garden at Genoa with Major Seton, her adorer, her vassal, her slave, at her feet.

Her slave: ay, he was that, she recollected well. Her slave, physically, carrying her in his arms, under the broiling sun, or crushing his great shoulders under impossible places at hide-and-seek; her inexorable master, the only one she had ever really owned, in matters of conscience. Once, when she was about eleven years old, she had told a deliberate story, though not a very black one, about the breaking of a china cup on which Bettina set great store; and Ralph, cognizant of the sin and of the falsehood alike, had given her his mute support throughout; had even allowed Mrs Lovell to throw the blame upon a certain little Tino, Archie's Italian sweetheart for the time being. "If you don't like to tell the truth, don't tell it," he said to her in secret. "I shall not betray you to Bettina, and I will play with you just as usual; only—don't kiss me; I will never let you kiss me until you are brave enough to take the blame off Tino." And with this awful pressure brought to bear upon her, Archie had confessed, and been punished, had given her white goat to Tino, and then loved Ralph Seton a hundred times better than ever for his severity.

The whole story came back upon her recollection at this moment; and even while she felt assured as to "poor old Ralph's" outward allegiance, the wonder crossed her whether in a matter of morals he would be as implacably severe as ever. "If he is, I can bear it," she thought, throwing a glance at him from beneath her long lashes. "If he did recognize me in London, and is only pretending before papa, I am not afraid. The punishment I thought so dreadful in Genoa, eight years ago, would not be much of a punishment in Morteville now." And Miss Lovell gave a little impertinent shudder at the thought of poor old Ralph's ugly face, and how his rough moustache had rasped her cheeks when he kissed her a minute ago.

Major Seton was certainly not a man to charm the fancy of any very young girl who had just parted from the handsome face and refined courtly presence of Gerald Durant. He was tall—well over six feet—deep-chested, and thin-flanked: a very model of manly strength, but built too much after the square solid fashion due to his Scottish descent to have a vestige of grace about him. His head, of the type that a friend would call good honest Saxon—an enemy, cocoa-nut shaped—was set somewhat stiffly on his broad

soldier-like shoulders. His feet were large; his hands were large, and excessively brown; and in his face there was not a handsome feature! Ordinary dark-grey eyes; a short, but by no means Grecian nose; a huge reddish-blonde moustache entirely covering his mouth, and the true Scottish height of cheek-bone. His chin, prominent and firmly cut, was the solitary point that could be called good in all that rugged exterior; for the effect of a row of white even teeth was marred by one of the front ones being broken short in two, a defect that it had never entered into Major Seton's brain to have remedied by art. His complexion, which had been fair as a boy, was tanned by exposure of all kinds, by Indian sun last of all, to a brown several shades darker than his hair; and its darkness was rendered still more conspicuous by a white jagged cicatrice, the mark of a sabre-cut he had received in his youth, which cleft just above the left eyebrow, and showed again, deep and irregularly traced, upon the bronze cheek beneath. This ancient wound, perhaps, joined to the weather-beaten skin and the broken front tooth, gave Major Seton that indescribable look which can be justly conveyed by no other word than battered. Jeanneton, when she let him in, summed him up briefly in her mind as a "vieux moustache." To Archie, in five minutes, he was "poor old Ralph." Not perhaps quite so advanced in years as her father or Bettina, but old, very old; thoroughly out of the world of Gerald and herself; an antediluvian creature with big hands and feet, a weather-beaten face, and a huge rough moustache that grated when he kissed you!

And yet this vieux moustache, this antediluvian creature, was a man younger in heart and spirit than Gerald Durant, and under thirty yet in actual age. Major Seton had lived much—though not in the sense which makes a Guardsman old at five-and-twenty! Poverty, self-denial, the sacrifice of every small and paltry pleasure to one great principle, had been necessities early thrust upon him in his boyhood; and what he had accepted perforce then had simply become an ingrained part of his nature now. Scotch, as their name implies, by descent, the Setons for two generations had been settled on a small estate in Staffordshire, which had entered the family by the marriage of Ralph's grandfather with an English heiress—or a lady whose fortune, compared with that of the

Setons, entitled her to be so called. The only son of this marriage, James Seton, lived long enough to spend every shilling he could touch of his inheritance; to involve his estate in debt; to marry a girl without a farthing, and leave an orphan heir to his debts in the person of Ralph.

The boy was sixteen years of age, and at Eton still, when his father died. He had always been brought up, by tutors and servants, to look upon himself as possessing considerably better prospects than most boys. There was money forthcoming, he knew, whenever he liked to ask for it. There were generally a couple of hunters ready for his use, and all kinds of conviviality and dissipation going on at home during the vacation. His father had avowedly sent him to Eton to play cricket, and keep up the habits and opinions of an English gentleman—and this the boy had done. His ideas of duty and of life in general were, to play cricket twenty-seven hours a week and read a little, but very little, for the classics at school; and to ride, shoot, play billiards, dine and drink with his elders, during the holidays. And so, while Gerald Durant was receiving all good and motherly advice from Lady Durant in the pious shelter of the Court, Ralph Seton at Ludbrooke Hall, five miles away from them, was, with his ruined father and his father's associates, leading a life during each vacation that already made the boy talked of as a baby-prodigal, a hopeful chip of the old block, throughout the country.

But at sixteen, the age when Gerald's emancipation from virtue was hereafter to begin, came young Seton's emancipation from vice —such skin-deep, schoolboy vice, of drinking and betting and billiard playing as it was! His father died: and on the day of the funeral the trustees told the boy the exact amount of debts to which he was heir. So many thousands of pounds from which the estate must legally clear itself; so many other thousands which, being personal debts, or debts of honour, a son might lawfully disclaim on coming of age.

Ralph had loved his father with the kind of passionate affection which open-handed, jovial, devil-may-care men like James Seton not unfrequently inspire in the children they are ruining; and not one bitter thought rose in his heart as the prospect of his own beggared life was laid before him. "My father never denied me

anything—my father never said a harsh word to me in my life." These were the only words he could stammer out; these were the recollections which made the tears run, like a girl's, down his face, when relations and lawyer spoke to him, with solemn looks and big words, of his father's extravagance, and the awful warnings that all these squandered thousands ought to prove to him. And the relations and lawyer exchanged opinions during their journey back to London after the funeral, as to whether the boy was a milksop or stupid, or only reckless like poor James.

He was not a milksop, or stupid, neither was he at sixteen a hero or a philosopher. In intellect Ralph was then, as now, a very ordinary fellow indeed; but something better than intellect —a large loving heart, and strength of will, derived possibly from remote Scottish ancestors, not certainly from the training of his early years—made him take up and hold to a noble purpose in life. Not a shilling of his dead father's debts but should eventually be paid: not a stain should rest upon his dead father's name if the work of his own right arm, the sacrifice of his whole life if need be, could cleanse it away. If Ludbrooke were let at once, the estate would clear itself in five years, the trustees had told him. In another five or six years, he calculated for himself, the debts of "honour" of James Seton might also be paid. What was to become of the heir of Ludbrooke during this time?—for the foregoing little exercise in arithmetic included no payments whatever save those to creditors. The poor boy on the evening of the funeral went round to the stables, the least desolate place it seemed to him, and standing there alone, looking wistfully at his favourite horse, a hunter James Seton had given two hundred guineas for some months before, asked himself this question: What was to become, during the next ten or twelve years, of the heir of Ludbrooke?

Most men in whom lies the germ of solid success can early test their own capacities pretty accurately. Standing alone with tear-stained cheek on this miserable day, when he stepped abruptly from childhood to man's estate, Ralph Seton examined, one by one, his abilities, such as they were, and decided that as far as books and study went he could do—nothing. He did not for a moment doubt his own strength in aught save books. An Eton boy of six-

teen knows tolerably well the sort of place he has held, and is likely to hold, among his peers. Young Seton was bold of spirit, strong in body; and possessed no small portion of that robust common sense and tact combined for which the Scotch word "canny" has not an English equivalent. In the world of boys he had held his ground, and he had no doubt of holding it in the world of men. Only, in what capacity? On this forlorn evening he thought over every employment by which money, traditionally, can be made—the bar, or East India service, or literature, for none of which he had capacity; commerce, for which he had neither capacity nor capital—then decided that, as he could choose no profession by which to make money, he must accept one by which at least he could avoid spending it.

"I have brains enough to wear a red coat and be shot at," he thought at last; "and, if I am not killed at once, I can exchange to India, and live upon my pay there." Upon which such visions of brave deeds and glory, elephant-hunting and pig-sticking, rose before the lad's imagination, as made him after a while go back to the house with a somewhat brightened face. And that night he wrote a letter to his guardian and next of kin setting forth his determination, and begging that the family interest might be used to get him a commission in some regiment on, or bound for, active service without delay.

Now the words "active service," or "wearing a red coat to be shot at," bore a very different significance at a time when the battle of the Alma had been newly fought to what they bear now; and Ralph's guardian, a good practical man of business, at once decided to grant the boy his wish. The army *was* about the best provision that could be made for poor James Seton's son; and without unnecessary delay the family interest set itself to work, to get young Ralph his commission. Not very much interest at that time was wanted: no need of studying for examinations: no difficulties raised even as to age. On the evening of his father's funeral Ralph first thought of the red coat—six weeks later he wore one, and was on his way to the Crimea; Ludbrooke was let to a pottery-manufacturer, and the furniture, hunters, pictures, all the holy things of Ralph's childhood, were in the hands of the Jews.

He went through all the Crimean campaign, and, to the comfort

of his relatives, was not killed; only at Inkerman he got that sabre-cut that marked him for life from a Cossack cuirassier, and his share of ague, rheumatism, and fever in the trenches. He had no opportunity of performing extraordinary deeds of valour, nor was the circumstance of Ensign Seton's face being cut open to the bone mentioned in any of the dispatches sent home to a grateful nation save as a "scratch." By virtue of other men's deaths he got tolerably rapid promotion; his good constitution carried him through his ague and fever; his wound would certainly disfigure him frightfully for years to come, the surgeons said, but it healed as it ought. At the end of the war he was in possession of his medals, a captain's pay, and the knowledge, so well did fate obey his wishes, that his regiment was spoken of by those high in authority as "safe for India." At the attack of the Redan—the inglorious ninety minutes, during which as many heroes fell as at Inkerman—Ralph Seton, and every other officer on the field, had behaved to the full as bravely, poor fellows, as though it had been another charge of the Six Hundred. But the men of his regiment had wavered, or were thought to have wavered; they were young boys, raw recruits, arrived from England a week before, and had many of them never fired a rifle in their lives; at all events a court of inquiry was held in consequence of their alleged misconduct, and although no official stigma was actually affixed to its name, it was perfectly well known in the army that the —th, or such of the —th as should remain, would, after the peace, be "safe for India."

To India they went, and had continued there ever since; the regimental plate and the colours, that is to say; the colonel, Major Seton, the quarter-master, and a few of the men—the mutiny, and two or three of the unhealthiest stations in Bengal, not having left much more of what originally sailed from England under the name of the —th. During these years Ralph Seton had returned once, for health's sake, to Europe, during which time he made the acquaintance of Mr Lovell in Italy. With the exception of those solitary eighteen months, his life, from the day he joined until now, more than thirteen years, had been, plainly and literally, a life spent on duty. He liked his profession as most men after five-and-twenty do like the army; tolerated it as an evil, one degree better than the poverty and idleness combined which would

have awaited him had he left it. Until every farthing of his father's debts were clear, he had sworn to himself not to touch a shilling of his income, and to this oath he kept—living on his pay from first to last, and holding, with stubborn fidelity, by his old regiment into whatever station it was ordered, and when all his brother officers in turn went home invalided, or exchanged, or sold. For amusement he shot tigers and stuck pigs, yearly feeling rather less excitement, perhaps, in the pursuit of these animals; and for society confined himself exclusively to men, among whom, from the tough colonel down to the rawest griff in the regiment, "old Seton" was popular.

To women—to the ladies, that is to say, of Indian stations—Major Seton was an enigma. In spite of his scarred and sunburnt face he might, had he chosen, have been a favourite with them, for he possessed that nameless charm of thorough simple manliness, which even the most frivolous women in their hearts find more irresistible than all Adonis forms and Grecian profiles. But he did not choose it. If, accidentally, he was thrown with the wives or sisters of his brother officers, he was deferential, almost tenderly courteous, in his manner towards them, but there it ended. When he met them at the band or at their drives next day, he returned their smiles with his usual grave salute—horrible old moustache as he was—and neither saw, nor attempted to see, more of them until some new accident forced him into their society.

Was he afraid of them, or of himself, or was he only a commonplace woman-hater? How should they tell? What should these gay Indian ladies know of the purposes of that lonely life, of the fair unsullied ideal, which, after long years of a soldier's life, Major Seton yet held to in his heart, of women and of love? Round the bungalows of other men hung pictures of fair faces by the score—operatic celebrities, women of the east and of the west, beauties of all nations and all climates: round Major Seton's hung a series of Landseer's proofs, a dozen or so of men's photographs, and of late years one oil-painting of a girl—a girl of about eleven, with blue eyes and a mignonne dark face, standing bareheaded under an Italian sky, and with a panorama of the bay of Genoa outstretched at her feet. Before his visit to Europe there had, it was re-

membered, been two or three women's portraits on his wall; but upon his return to India he cleared these scrupulously away before hanging up his new possession. "I just prefer seeing the child alone," he remarked, quietly, when one of his friends attempted to joke with him on the dethronement of old favourites; and after this no one asked him any further questions on the subject. There were few men who chose to question Major Seton on any subject respecting which he had once shown a disposition to be reticent.

"And you find her a great deal changed, Ralph?" said Mr Lovell, while Ralph still continued to stroke down his moustache, and look silently at Archie. "You would not have recognized the little Italian girl you used to play with in this tall, stately, full-grown young person?"

"I should have recognized her anywhere," answered Ralph, "or at least I believe I should," he added, promptly. "Knowing that you lived at Morteville, and suspecting this to be your house, I certainly remembered Archie's face the first moment that I had a glimpse of it at the window."

"And if any other young woman with red hair and a brown face had been looking out you would have recognized her just the same," cried Archie, carelessly. "One finds what one expects to find! Now that I am told you are Major Seton, I remember Major Seton. If I had met you anywhere else—" she hesitated, and her eyes sank under his.

"If you had met Major Seton anywhere else," put in Bettina, opportunely, "*I* should have been with you of course, Archie, and should have helped you to recollect your papa's friend." The poor little woman was quite bristling with her new sense of wanting everybody belonging to her to be decorous. "Archie needs the society of a few young girls of her own age, Major Seton," she added, apologetically. "Travelling about in the wild way we have done, I have thought it best never to let her mix with any other young people; but living settled in an English county of course it will be very different."

And then Bettina—Mr Lovell having gone away to store his cabinets safe out of reach of Jeanneton's hands—put Major Seton through a long course of questions as to the social capabilities of Hatton. Plenty of rich manufacturing people? ah yes, very well

in their way, but not what she had been accustomed to in her youth, and the neighbouring clergy of course, and Major Seton himself. But what immediate neighbours?—nice people?—people they would be likely to get on with? and with any girl of Archie's age in the family?

"Well," said Major Seton, "the people to whom you will be nearest are the Durants. Durant's Court is about two miles from the rectory, and Lucia is, I should think, about the same age as Archie."

"Durant—Durant!" chirped Bettina. "Dear me, how familiar it sounds! Archie, where can I have heard the name of Durant lately?"

But Archie had bent her head over a French railway-guide that lay upon the table, and was intently studying the advertisement of a company for reclaiming waste lands near Bordeaux. "I—I beg your pardon, Bettina! What did you say? Davenant? Douro? oh, Durant—why, Durant was the name of that young Englishman I danced with at the ball the other night—don't you remember?"

"Of course it was. A nice little man, Major Seton, with yellow whiskers and a neat figure. Could it have been one of the Staffordshire family, should you think?"

A nice little man, with yellow whiskers and a neat figure! At any other time Archie would have fired up indignantly at such a hideous caricature of Gerald's handsome person, but she remained mute and still now, reading on without noting a word—though months afterwards she could remember it accurately—of that prospectus for reclaiming the waste lands near Bordeaux, while she waited breathlessly for Major Seton's reply.

"A small man with yellow whiskers—that sounds like Gerald. You don't know his Christian name, I suppose?" But he addressed the question pointedly to Bettina, not Archie.

Mrs Lovell answered no; she had, indeed, not been introduced herself to Mr Durant; could Archie remember if the name of the little man she danced with was Gerald?

"It was," answered Miss Lovell, laconically. "I know it because he wrote his name down on my card, Gerald Sidney Durant." After which she went on diligently with her study of

the waste lands. Liability of shareholders to be limited in accordance with the international treaty of 1862: capital already subscribed, 300,000 francs: and then on through a list of directors, bankers, brokers, auditors, and secretaries, down to the solicitors and temporary offices of the company.

"Well, Gerald Sidney Durant will before very long be one of your closest neighbours," went on Major Seton, in his quiet voice. "He is engaged to be married to his cousin Lucia, the heiress of Durant's Court."

Archie Lovell's heart turned to ice: Bettina, always fired into intense excitement by the barest mention of a marriage, began immediately to ply Major Seton with questions. When would it take place? Where would the young people live? How much a year would they have to start with? Had he not interrupted her she would before long have got, no doubt, to the materials of the bride's dress, and what Archie would wear if she should be invited to be bridesmaid.

"It has been a very long engagement indeed, Mrs Lovell;" and something in the distinct tone of his voice, in the scrupulous way in which he continued to address himself to Bettina, made Archie feel that every word he uttered was designedly, and of malice aforethought, addressed to herself. "An engagement commencing when Miss Durant was about two years of age and Gerald nine. There have been rumours of late, I hear, of a misunderstanding between them," he added; "but the idea of the engagement being really broken off is ridiculous. Sir John and Lady Durant are just as much in love with Gerald as Lucia is—"

"And Gerald himself?" cried Archie, as Major Seton hesitated, forgetting the waste lands and the part she was acting and everything else in her intense eagerness to hear what Gerald felt.

"Gerald himself *must* marry Lucia Durant," replied Major Seton, looking round, for the first time, at the girl's flushing face. "He has no choice at all in the matter."

"Oh, I thought a man always had some choice as to the woman he marries."

"Not when he is tied hand and foot, like poor Gerald. The lad is over head and ears in debt; his cousin Lucia on her marriage will have a clear fifteen hundred a year, and eventually every

shilling her father has to leave. I should say, with what his wife brought him," added the Major, in his accurate Scotch way, "very close upon fifty thousand pounds."

Fifty thousand pounds! Archie felt the same sort of profound crushing conviction as to her own worthlessness as she had done when Gerald first showed her the photograph of Lucia's faultless features. Fifty thousand pounds! and she, a pauper, had dared to think it possible that he liked her!

"I see," she murmured, half to herself, and dropping her face down over the book again; "I suppose there *is* no choice left when a man once decides to sell himself for money."

"Sell, my dear Archie!" cried Bettina. "Do leave off those silly, indeed indelicate, expressions. This Mr Gerald Durant is a very lucky man indeed, and it will be a great privilege to you having a nice young married woman living so near us. The young people will continue to live at the Court, I suppose, Major Seton?" And straightway visions of wedding-parties, dinner-parties, morning calls, and the dresses that she, the rector's wife, would wear on all these occasions, presented themselves with delicious breadth and fulness of detail before Bettina's mind.

"When you condemn a man for marrying for money, you should remember what the man is," remarked Ralph, who already had fallen into the habit common to all human creatures who knew her, of answering about one in fifteen of Bettina's questions. "If you knew Gerald as I do, Archie, you would feel it impossible to apply any harsh terms to him, whatever he does."

"Should I?"

"Yes, I am quite sure you would. My own practical experience of Gerald's character has been confined to the years when we were boys together—or rather when I was an old boy, he a child; for there are a good many years between us—and to the few weeks I spent with him when I was home on leave seven years ago; but yet I believe I know him as well as if I had never lost sight of him in all the intervening time. What Gerald was at twelve I found him as a Guardsman of nineteen, and shall find him again now at twenty-six. Characters like his develop, of course, but they don't change."

Just at this juncture Bettina—even in her new dreams of great-

ness not unmindful of the present honour of the house—remembered that there was only the remains of the cold fillet and a salad for supper, and jumping up, with a string of apologies to Major Seton, prepared to leave the room.

"I shan't be away from you five minutes, Major Seton, but Frederick will be impatient unless I help him with his cabinets." Mr Lovell would not have let her touch one of them for the universe. "Archie, my love, amuse Major Seton by showing him your photographs while I am gone." And then she rushed off to the kitchen to send Jeanneton to the Couronne d'Argent (the back way, on account of Mrs Maloney) for a roti and sweets; and Archie and Major Seton were left alone.

For the first time in her life Miss Lovell experienced the sensation of shyness. Her hands trembled; the colour rose and fell in her face. When Bettina left the room it was as much as she could do not to get up and follow her. But Major Seton saw, or pretended that he saw, no symptom of her embarrassment.

"You have heard of your father's new prospects, of course, Archie?" he remarked, but without having the air of seeking to change their conversation. "I need scarcely ask you if you are glad at his good fortune. I suppose England is a sort of El Dorado to your mind at present?"

Then Archie raised her eyes, and looked at Ralph Seton full. He was scrutinizing her face, she felt, line by line, and she fancied there was an anxious, half-pained look upon his own, as though he would fain have bid her speak the truth, and trust in him, and take him to be her friend. Should she do so? Her heart said yes; and she stammered out his name—"Ralph!"

He was at her side in a moment; stooping over her low, and holding both her little cold hands in one of his own large ones. Archie's heart beat horribly thick—thicker far than when she stood alone on London Bridge by night with Gerald Durant. Gerald was young and handsome, and boyish; so much nearer her own size in every way than this great soldier, with his staid manner and his enormous height, and his rough old, scarred, and weather-beaten face—more scarred and weatherbeaten than she had known, now that she saw it close! A mortal terror overcame her that he

might be going to kiss her again, and she jumped up nervously, and snatched her hands away from him.

"I—I think I must go after Bettina, Major Seton—that is," stammering and looking more and more frightened, "I mean, papa may want me."

"Directly; when you have answered my question. Are you glad of this prospect of seeing England for the first time?"

"Why do you ask me?" she cried, the first instinctive impulse towards confession growing weaker every moment. "Of course I am glad. Of course it will be better to live respectably in a parsonage than to knock about the world as we have done." And she drew herself up to her full height, and tossing her hair back over her shoulders, looked steadily, almost defiantly, into Major Seton's face.

"And it really is the first time that you will see England?" he repeated, slowly and distinctly. "I understood your father right. You have never been in England since you were born?

"Never!" cried Archie, with a sort of gasp. "Or, at least, papa and Bettina say so, and of course they ought to know."

After which she felt better; her dread of Ralph, her shyness, her hesitation gone. She was in a new world; and yet it seemed to her as though she had been accustomed to it all her life; as though falsehoods were very easy to tell when the time came; nay, more, as though, after the first cold shock was over, there was a kind of pleasant pungency or zest in telling them!

Major Seton walked away to the window, plunged his hands into his coat-pockets, and put his lips into the set compressed position which for him meant whistling. "He knows nothing," thought Archie, as she watched him. "He is not sure, or he would have asked me more questions, and I was right to put him off. Am I to go about telling wild stories of myself to everybody, now that poor papa is a rector?"

And forgetting that she wanted to follow Bettina, she sat down and returned to the study of the waste lands, while Ralph Seton stood for five minutes or more in the same attitude, his lips going through the same pantomime of whistling as he gazed out steadily into the street.

He suffered—strong man as he was—an intense, a fearful loss during these five minutes: he lost the one pure belief of the last six years of his life. The women he had taken down from his walls when he first hung Archie there, might be put back again, he felt; the picture of the fresh unsullied child, for whose sake he had dethroned them, was the picture of something that had no existence now. Archie Lovell was a woman, just as well worth loving and marrying as other women perhaps, but his ideal of truth and innocence and unstained loyalty no longer.

He came back, and looked at her very long and kindly. "Miss Lovell," he said at last, for the first time not calling her Archie, "you are a grown-up young lady, as your father reminded me now, and I—well, there is more difference between us by far than there was in Genoa, when you were a little child and I was your playfellow—your tame bear rather, as you used to call me. I can't expect you will give me your confidence now as you used, but"—his voice shook slightly—"I hope we shall be very good neighbours indeed when you come to England, and that if ever you should by possibility need me you will look upon me as your friend."

But though he was quite close to where she sat, he made no attempt to approach any nearer to her now; and with a quick contraction of the heart, the girl felt that she need not be afraid of the pressure of the huge hands, of the contact of the rough moustache again. Half child, half woman as she was, Archie Lovell's real liking for Major Seton dated from that moment. For in that moment she acknowledged him to be, not her slave, not her equal, but her master!

"If you don't like to tell the truth, don't tell it. I shall not betray you, and I will play with you just as usual. Only—don't kiss me. I will never let you kiss me until you are brave enough to take the blame off Tino." She recalled again that threat of years ago; recalled the night she had cried so bitterly because he held so staunchly to his word; and how at length he *had* kissed her again; kissed and loved, and trusted her more than ever! What would he think if he knew the truth now? Would he ever take her back to his regard if he discovered the falsehood she had this moment told him?

As she bent her face low down over her book, Major Seton stood and watched her still. He watched the outline of the graceful head; the bend of the girlish throat, the delicately-modelled arm that lay upon the table, the dark lashes resting on the soft flushed cheek—every outward charm developed into sweet perfection of this child he had made an idol of! And as he stood, he put her resolutely away out of his heart. The thought of coming back and finding her thus; the child's face changed into a woman's—but the child's loyal heart matured into a woman's integrity—the hope of one day winning her for his wife, had been, during more than six years, the poetry, the brightness of Ralph Seton's lonely life. And now with the material part of his destiny accomplished, his father's debts paid, Ludbrooke his own again, and Archie before him—fairer than he had seen her in his dreams—he stood, even in this first hour of their meeting, and put her resolutely away out of his heart.

He was no enthusiast, with romantic visions of women being angels; he was a very plain and cautious man, fresh enough, certainly, to desire to possess a beautiful face by his own fireside, but who had seen sufficient of the world, and of the worst part of the world, to know when prudence bade him subordinate inclination to reason. For common conventionalities, for what are termed the opinions of society, he cared nothing. If Archie had boldly confessed that she had gone to London with Gerald, nay, had she confessed that she went of set purpose, not by accident, he might have liked her rather the better for the pluck such an escapade showed—experience having told him that in extreme youth the best women are sometimes those who incur the maddest risks. But a girl who, at seventeen, could raise her blue eyes innocently, and toss her curls back like a child, and, looking full into a man's face, tell a deliberate falsehood, as she had done a minute ago, was no wife for him. He loved her: would love her with passion if he married her; would put his life, and what was dearer than his life, into her hands, and then—some day wake to find that the blue eyes were traitors, the red lips forsworn! He had seen not a few such endings to man's happiness in India, and was too great a coward (this was his own thought) to run the risk himself. A girl who could deceive without a blush at seventeen, might make

a good wife still for some young fellow who should so command her heart as to put all temptation to deceit out of her way. An old soldier like him must marry a truer or a plainer woman if he married at all—but never this one!

And so, with tender pity for the little girl, with chivalrous resolve to be her friend all the more because from henceforth he would never be her lover, Major Seton put Archie away out of his heart as he stood and looked at her.

CHAPTER XX.

CAPTAIN WATERS' SENSE OF DUTY.

Major Seton returned again to England that evening. He had not been able, he said, to deny himself the pleasure of bearing good news to his old friends, but it was impossible for him to do more than pay them a flying visit now. His papers must be sent in to the Horse Guards at once; he had a visit to pay in Scotland; hosts of lawyers' business to get through in London. And when Archie and Mr Lovell went down to the pier to see him off by the last steamer, they never knew that among the luggage from the Couronne d'Argent was a portmanteau bearing the name of Major Seton, —th Regiment; never knew that, in spite of his business, he had made preparations for staying with them a week, and had remained five hours.

Before leaving home Miss Lovell stole out into the courtyard of the house, and gathered a branch of myrtle in full flower that grew against its southern wall. She wore it in her belt till the minute came for saying good-bye; then took it out and began to trifle with its leaves irresolutely. If Major Seton would only ask her for it, she thought! If she could only see her flower in his button-hole when he went away, she should feel as if there was a sort of friendly compact between them still. She remembered the jealous care with which she used to pin a flower into his coat every morning at Genoa, and how, withered or not withered, he always

left it there through the remainder of the day. But Major Seton held his hand out and said "Good-bye, Miss Lovell," very much in the same tone as he said good-bye to her father; then went quietly away down the steps to the boat that was waiting to take him to the steamer. A choking feeling came in Archie's throat as she leant across the bulwark of the pier and watched him. How different Gerald's handsome animated face had looked when he bade her good-bye—horrible grim old soldier that Major Seton was! And partly through temper, partly by accident, partly on purpose—who shall divine the motives of a girl of seventeen?—she flung away her myrtle-branch, and it fell into the boat, almost between Major Seton's hands.

"Well aimed, child," said her father, putting his arm round her shoulder. "You and Ralph are just as fierce lovers as ever, I see, Archie."

"Lovers!" cried Archie, with a quick toss of the head. "You forget, I think, papa, that I'm not eleven years old now. Poor old Ralph, a lover for me, indeed!" But she watched very narrowly to see what poor old Ralph would do, and she kissed her hand to him with one of her brightest smiles, as soon as she saw with what tender care he picked her myrtle up; and how religiously he stored it away within the breast of his grey great-coat.

And this was the picture of her that Ralph took away with him; her face flushing in the setting sun; her blue eyes smiling; her lips parted as she kissed her little hand to him; her father's arm around her shoulder. Major Seton betook himself to one of the paddle-boxes, from whence he watched the two figures on the pier, and afterwards Morteville, till all were out of sight. Then he got out his pocket-book and, turning still in the direction of France, looked long and closely at a photograph that Mr Lovell had given him before he left; a photograph of a girl, with long fair hair unbound, dressed in a loose blouse, with a palette and brushes in her hand: and finally, he took from his breast the piece of myrtle that Archie had thrown to him, and held it (no one fortunately being near to witness the utterly ridiculous action) to his lips.

These were the first steps by which the old moustache carried out his resolve of putting Miss Lovell away out of his heart!

Meanwhile, Mr Lovell and his daughter strolled slowly homeward in the pleasant evening sunlight. The last twenty-four hours seemed to have alienated Archie strangely from all her former happy childish life; and she clung now with a welcome sense of peace to the dear arm which had been her stay always; looked up with a remorseful yearning of love to the dear face which she knew no folly, no guilt of hers, could ever cause to look upon her coldly. What was Gerald Durant, what was Major Seton, compared to him? A pang smote her heart as she felt how quickly she had been able to forget him for these strangers; the consciousness that she *had* forgotten him made her manner to him tenderer, her smile more loving than usual, as they walked along.

"That cabinet you have bought is a beauty, papa. I shall hardly like it to ever go away again. You never picked up such a *bonheur du jour* before."

"Archie," answered Mr Lovell, in the calm voice of a man announcing some excellence too patent to need enlarging upon, "it is a Reisener, the design by Boucher, and executed in marqueterie with an art, a delicacy, that makes it a perfect cabinet picture in wood. If it is worth a sou it is worth four thousand francs. Perhaps now that I am a rich man," added the poor fellow, looking as radiant as a child, "a rich country parson, Archie, with four hundred pounds a year, I may feel myself justified in keeping that cabinet for my own enjoyment."

"I wish you could, papa, and the clock too—that beautiful Boule clock. Ah, if we had only more money! Money enough to pay off all our debts and start in England clear."

"Oh, as to money, I have arranged that very easily," said Mr Lovell, lightly. "But don't mistake about the clock, Archie. As a speculation I did well to buy it, but I would not care to possess it as a gift. Boule, as you know, had two styles. In his first and glorious one, he worked in plain, honest brass and ebony. In his second—in his decadence, his shame! he sacrificed art to the miserable fashion of the day, of which this tawdry toy I bought at Amiens is a specimen. Lowered himself and his splendid talent to mother-of-pearl. Don't forget this again, child—'tis a most important distinction."

"And the money, papa? The money to pay off all our creditors and start us afresh in England?"

"Oh, yes—the money! A mere trifle—six or eight hundred pounds at most."

"And how shall we raise it? Would the bishop advance your salary, do you think, if you were to explain everything to him?" Miss Lovell's knowledge of church matters was sketchy in the extreme.

"The bishop advance my salary!" said Mr Lovell, laughing. "No, you little goose. Some one much better than a bishop has advanced me what I want already."

Archie's cheeks fired in a moment. She knew too well her father's fatal habit of borrowing from whomsoever he came across to doubt the meaning of his words. This explained the long conversation which her father and Major Seton had had together in the studio: this explained the cause of his joyous light-heartedness as they walked down to see Ralph off by the steamer.

"Oh, papa, I hope poor Major Seton has not—"

"Archie, my love," interrupted Mr Lovell, quickly, "poor Major Seton is a man with a clear twelve or fifteen hundred a year, and—thanks to his own honourable exertions and economy—a very handsome balance at his banker's. I explained to him the exact position in which I stand, and how my new poem, or 'Troy,' or both, must be sacrificed to pay my debts, and he saw instantly, as a matter of business—a matter of business, my dear, that you can't understand, how much wiser it would be to bide a fitting time instead of trying to force works of art or literature upon the market. In six weeks 'Troy' will be finished. I shall exhibit it at the Royal Academy next spring, and if it only brings me five or six hundred pounds (the half of its real value) it will go a great way towards setting us straight."

"And meanwhile, Major Seton has helped us? Tell me, papa, I would rather know."

"Certainly, Archie, you shall know. I like you to hear everything that is in our good old friend's favour. In the mean while Seton advances me one thousand pounds, to be repaid him with the interest of fifty pounds this day year. We shall thus be

enabled to pay off every farthing of our foreign debts, to sacrifice neither 'Troy' nor my book, and to surround ourselves in our poor little parsonage with objects of art and grace instead of the mere bodily necessities, the bare walls and chairs and tables, with which most country parsons are I fancy content! Ralph is a shrewd fellow," he added; "no doubt of that. The Scotch blood shows in his aptness for business if in nothing else. Five per cent. without risk is an investment one does not meet with every day. He told me so himself."

Archie was silent. To argue with her father on money matters was, she well knew, fruitless. He believed, simply, that he was acting with the nicest honour in paying his foreign debtors out of another man's money; believed, implicitly, that 'Troy' would sell for five hundred guineas. Her quick imagination pictured him already, dreaming and poetizing, and living beyond his means (that was inevitable) in the new rectory; the house filled with pictures and cabinets. 'Troy' unsold, and the interest even of that thousand pounds of Ralph's never paid. "You know best, papa," with a quiet little reproach in her voice; "and when it is a question of selling your pictures or poems, I don't like to speak a word. But I do wish we could have started in England without being under obligation to any one."

"You make me feel my want of success, Archie, when you say that," was his answer. Whenever money affairs were talked of Mr Lovell had a trick of falling back plaintively upon his hard work and his evil luck, as though to turn aside his listener from the unwelcome subject. "I have not—God knows I have not failed, as far as labour goes, one year since you were born. Only the reward has been tardy of coming! If I had had the luck of other men, writers and painters, inferior to me in ability, you would not have to reproach me now, child, with my want of independence."

A flush passed over his pale face, and in a moment Archie repented of what she had said, and fell to comforting him—the wise head of seventeen comforting the baby of forty-five—as she had done all her life whenever the word "failure" passed his lips. "They will not go on misunderstanding you for ever, dear. When we live in England you'll be able to know the Royal Academy

people personally, and when they know you they will be sure to like you, and to accept your picture. I dare say it's a great deal more favour than merit, if we really knew, that gets pictures and poems accepted in London—and your new poem must be liked, I am sure of it. There is only a quarter of a canto to finish still, is there, papa?"

And having now started her father upon the subject, which to him embraced all other interests of life, Archie felt, with intense relief, that this at least would be no time for her own confession. She had meant faithfully to tell him everything during her walk home. Every word she had spoken had been, in reality, a prelude to the confession she was seeking to make. Yet now that chance seemed to have turned the opportunity for confession aside, she was thankful exceedingly for the reprieve. Let him be at peace to-day at all events, poor fellow! Let him be happy in the discussion of his new and brightened prospects, and to-morrow when she had had a night to think over it all, and frame her story into the words that should pain him least, she would tell him and Bettina together what she had done.

Just as they reached their house in the Rue d'Artois they were met by Captain Waters, dressed in the height of French watering-place fashion, and smoking his twelfth, or final cigarette before dinner. As Archie and her father approached he put himself so resolutely, hat in hand, in their path, that Mr Lovell, who ordinarily shunned all the English world of Morteville, felt himself constrained to stop.

"A fine evening, Miss Wilson. You have been taking your usual stroll on the sands, I suppose?"

"No, Captain Waters, we have been on the pier seeing a friend of ours away by the steamer."

It was new for the Lovell family to possess a friend in Morteville, and Archie felt a little proud of announcing the fact.

"Your friend will have a fine passage, then. It was very calm at sea last night, was it not?"

"I—I believe so," she answered, her face flushing scarlet at the suddenness of the question. "But I was told you went over to the Calais *fêtes* yesterday, Captain Waters. You ought to know."

"My wife and myself spent yesterday in Amiens," remarked Mr

Lovell, innocently. "We were at the sale of the Chateau Floriac, and only returned this morning. It was one of the most extraordinary sales of old and valuable wood-carvings that I remember to have seen in France, Captain Waters. I purchased myself a *bonheur du jour* that is known, historically, to have been carved for Madame de Pompadour, and a clock—but I don't know whether you are a connoisseur in the artifice of that particular period, sir?"

"I believe I am a connoisseur in the artifices of all periods and all nations," answered Waters, with an imperceptible smile, and a glance at Archie, whose mingled *finesse* and insolence it would be hard to describe. "But my knowledge," he added, addressing himself deferentially to Mr Lovell, "or what passes to myself for knowledge in such matters, would be contemptible compared to yours. I have long heard that in all matters of antiquarian art your judgment is simply unrivalled."

"Well—yes—I believe it is the one subject I know something about," replied Mr Lovell, for whose easily-pleased vanity no flattery was too palpable. "In such rare intervals of leisure as I have been able to snatch from my own work, I have dabbled for years in bricbracquerie all over Europe, and with tolerable success."

"And by this time must have quite a collection of art treasures?" said Waters, who seemed determined to prolong the conversation. "You have not got them with you here in Morteville, of course?"

"No, no," answered Mr Lovell. "My poor art treasures, as you are pleased to call them, are in Paris, and will remain there till I take them with me to England—I hope, in two or three weeks from the present time."

Captain Waters was politely interested at once in Mr Wilson's departure; had no idea that Morteville was so soon to lose them; and poor Mr Lovell in his simplicity began forthwith to expatiate on his plans, while Archie, her heart swelling with indignant disgust, stood silently by and listened. She knew her father's peculiarity on this point of old. Shy to the most painful degree, shy to such an extent that he would walk any number of miles sooner than have to stop and speak to an acquaintance in the street, Mr Lovell, in the hands of a man like Waters, could, with

one or two well-timed compliments, be drawn into the foolish confidence of a child.

"We have been living very quietly indeed, here in Morteville, Captain Waters," he said at last, "which must explain the want of hospitality I have shown to my friends, yourself among others;" he had spoken to Waters about twice in his life before; "friends whom under different circumstances it would have given me real pleasure to entertain; but if you ever come to our part of the country I shall be happy, very happy indeed, to see you." He was meditating a sidelong escape to the house as he said this; and thought that a hazy offer of distant hospitality might be the easiest way of covering his retreat.

Captain Waters raised his hat, in his courteous foreign fashion, and expressed the pleasure it would give him to renew Mr Wilson's acquaintance. "In—in Leicestershire, I think you said?" he added, carelessly. "A county I know remarkably well, and often visit."

"No, in Staffordshire; Hatton, in Staffordshire," said Mr Lovell; "stay, I will give you the address." And he took out a card and wrote upon it in pencil his address, "The Honourable and Rev. Frederick Lovell, Hatton, Staffordshire;" then shaking his friend's hand, with warmth prompted by his intense nervous desire to get quit of him, ran away into the house.

Captain Waters examined the card curiously for a minute. "The Honourable and Rev. Frederick Lovell, Miss Wilson?" he remarked, raising his eyes to Archie's face. "I must really ask you to decipher this mystery for me. Who is the Honourable and Reverend Frederick Lovell? and why has Mr Wilson been kind enough to give me his address?"

"The Reverend Frederick Lovell is my father," answered Archie, stiffly; "I am sure I cannot tell why he gave you his address."

She moved, as though to follow her father into the house, but Captain Waters had placed himself in such a position that she could not pass without actually requesting him to move. "And —my question may seem indiscreet," he continued; "but why have we here in Morteville not known the honourable and reverend character of the gentleman who was living among us?"

"Because, living in such a place, and among *such* people, my

father found it convenient to pass under an assumed name," cried Archie, with a superb toss of her head. "Are you satisfied, Captain Waters?"

"Oh, entirely," answered Waters, with a half-smile. "Living in such a place, and among *such* people, the Honourable Frederick Lovell has showed great wisdom, I think, in concealing his name. How long has your papa been rector of Hatton, Miss Wilson?—Miss Lovell, I really beg your pardon for falling back into old bad habits."

"There is no need to apologize—indeed I hardly see why you should talk of old habits; did we ever speak to each other in our lives before, Captain Waters? My father has been rector of Hatton about four days. The old rector died a week or so ago, and Lord Lovell, my grandfather, has given the living to papa. I must really ask you to let me pass, please."

She swept past him with the manner of a little queen, and turning slightly as soon as she found herself within the shelter of their own door, gave him a freezing inclination of her head, as much as to say, "Go! I have dismissed you!"

Captain Waters admired Archie Lovell warmly at this minute. That she suspected his possession of her secret he was certain; that she dared to brave him, answer his impertinent questions with impertinent answers, and stand looking at him now with this air of regal dismissal, pleased him infinitely. To have possessed the secret of any ordinary English school-girl of her age would have offered poor chance either of profit or amusement to himself. An ordinary school-girl who would have blushed and cried, and supplicated to him to spare her, and then probably have gone, straightway, and betrayed herself to her mamma! To possess the secret of a girl like this, a girl who, at her age, had a woman's courage as well as a woman's duplicity, might, well worked, be really a little mine of diversion and of profit to him. For a secret that escapade evidently was: Mr Lovell's innocent account of his journey to Amiens had betrayed so much to him, and however fool-hardy the girl had been when she was Miss Wilson, it was almost mathematically clear to Captain Waters' perception that Miss Lovell, the daughter of the Honourable and Reverend rector of Hatton, would be sage!

It was the habit of this man's life, a necessity forced upon him by his profession, perhaps, to assign to every human creature with whom he was thrown the worst, the most selfish motives possible. "My lot has been cast among bad specimens of humanity," he would say, candidly, in speaking of his own cynicism. "For more years than I can count the worst people in the worst continental towns have been my study, and when by accident I have to deal with the really good and virtuous, I mechanically apply the same low standard to them as to the rest. And it is really curious to remark," he would add, putting up his eye-glass, and looking languidly in his listener's face, "curious, very, to remark how nicely the same measure seems to fit everybody after all!"

"And you will leave Morteville soon, then, I fear, Miss Lovell, from what your papa said?"

"Very soon, I hope, Captain Waters. I am heartily glad to get away from the place, and from everything connected with it."

"Everything, Miss Lovell? Can you really say so? Will you have no one pleasant recollection of poor little Morteville? No walk, no ball, at which you have enjoyed yourself?"

"No; there is not one circumstance, and certainly not one person here, that I want to remember." But still she did not go away. Something in the expression of Waters' face seemed to constrain her, in spite of her repugnance for the man, to hear all that he had to say.

"I understand. The past and all belonging to it, pleasant or the reverse, is to be buried. Miss Lovell"—abruptly—"is Hatton, in Staffordshire, anywhere in the neighbourhood of Durant's Court, do you know?"

Her heart beat so violently that for a moment she could not trust herself to speak; then, with a supreme effort of self-command, she answered, as indifferently as she could, yes. The rectory at Hatton was, she had heard, about two miles distant from Durant's Court.

"Ah! that will be charming for all parties," said Waters, pleasantly. "No wonder, Miss Lovell, that you are glad to leave Morteville. I should like very much myself to meet Gerald Durant again," he added. "He was an uncommonly pleasant fellow in his way, capital companion, and all that, but not quite the stamp

of man, perhaps, one could make a friend of. Shifty, rather; a new caprice every five minutes; no sooner winning a thing than he was sure to tire of it. You agree with me, Miss Lovell?"

"I don't know, I'm sure," cried Archie, desperately. "What should I know of Mr Durant? Why do you ask me?"

Waters advanced a step within the open doorway, and put his head quite close to Archie's. "Miss Lovell," he whispered, "I am sorry that you treat me with so little confidence. You are wrong, I think; for I wish—upon my soul I wish—to stand your friend; and I have it in my power to do so. Do you believe me?"

A look of frightened disgust was all her answer; but Captain Waters did not appear in the slightest degree discountenanced. "This is not the time to tell you what I mean," he went on, still in a half-whisper, and in the same odious closeness of position. "What I have got to say will take time, and should be said in a place"—and as he spoke he glanced at Madame Brun's open window—"where there is no possibility of eaves-droppers. Now, if I might hope to meet you on the Grève of a morning? To-morrow morning, for example?"

"I don't know, I'm sure. What can you have to tell me?" she stammered. "If you want to say anything, say it now. When I walk on the Grève it is with papa."

Just at this moment Jeanneton—hot and indignant still, from her recent encounters with Bettina—came forth; laden with straw, bass dust, and deposit of all kinds from the cases of bric-a-brac, on her way to the court. At the sight of mademoiselle in conversation with another gentleman (and a very pretty little gentleman, Jeanneton decided, as she mentally compared Waters with Major Seton), she stopped short, opened her mouth wide, and prepared to listen or join in the conversation, according to the custom of French servants of her class.

Waters was not slow at turning her opportune appearance to account. "You see this is not a place to talk in, Miss Lovell," he urged, but in a coldly-deferential manner, now that the servant's eyes were upon them. "Tell me, please, if I can see you on the Grève to-morrow, or not? There is a very unpleasant story going the round of the place to-day, which makes it my duty to communicate with some member of your family. Can you meet me,

or," he added this with marked emphasis, "shall my communication be made in writing to Mr Lovell himself?"

He had found out the way to subjugate her at last. At the mention of her father, at the thought of what this story must be that Waters threatened to write to him about, every tinge of colour forsook Archie's face. She clasped her hands together as if a sharp bodily pain had smitten her. "No, no, Captain Waters! write nothing, say nothing to papa, and I will meet you whenever you choose. On the Grève, if you will, to-morrow morning. Only, if he is with me, say nothing please till I can manage to see you alone! We always like to spare poor papa any trouble that we can," she added half apologetically, and lifting her eyes with an expression of mute entreaty to Captain Waters' impassive face.

"Don't be afraid, Miss Lovell; I shall behave with the most perfect discretion in every way, you may rest assured. To-morrow morning on the Grève then; between ten and eleven will not be too early? And in the mean time, mademoiselle, *au plaisir de vous révoir.*"

He took his hat off to the ground, then sauntered jauntily away down the Rue d'Artois, twirling his diminutive cane in one little well-gloved hand, with the other alternately caressing his pointed, flaxen moustache, and putting up his eye-glass, but with dilettante curiosity rather than impertinence, at every woman who chanced to pass him on the *trottoir*.

"And this is respectability," thought Archie, bitterly. "This is Philistinism, and the kind of price one has to pay for it! Oh! that the rector of Hatton hadn't died, and that I might have dared tell Ralph the truth, and bade this man and every one else in Morteville do their worst!"

And with a hard sullen look, such as in all her happy Bohemian life her face had never worn before; her teeth set, her eyes fixed and dilated till all their blue seemed gone; she stood and watched Captain Waters' retreating figure till it was out of sight.

CHAPTER XXI.

ARCHIE'S CONFESSION.

In all the great and solemn crises of her earthly pilgrimage—creditors pressing them more sorely than their wont; old Lord Lovell returning inhuman answers to appeals for money; poor Frederick's pictures making their periodical journeys home, unsold, from London—the instant devastation, or, as she termed it herself, "setting to rights" of the entire clothing of the household, had been, for years past, an unfailing source of comfort to Bettina's troubled spirit.

This devastation, a kind of sacrifice laid upon the altar of the *Dii penates*—and having its origin, doubtless, in that mysterious instinct which has made man from the earliest ages believe in some occult power of propitiatory offerings to avert impending grief—had, indeed, by force of habit become incorporated at length as a vital, or integral, part of Bettina's religion. And so to-day, although the news of coming into four hundred a year, besides the glebe, was an occasion rather for thanksgiving than humiliation, her heart, staunch to its traditions, had flown (after due preliminary torture of the acolyte, Jeanneton) to the formal celebration of the rites or services of her creed for relief.

Now the first feature in these rites was to take out everybody's clothes from their different drawers and cupboards, and to pile them in heaps on beds, chairs, and all other available pieces of furniture round the rooms: the second, to sort them over, or subdivide them indefinitely over the floors until there was no place left on which to plant the sole of the foot: the third, to sit down and cry over every one's extravagance, Archie's growth, and the ravages of moth: and the last, to make long lists, never looked at again by human eye, of every article of clothing the family possessed, and then return them, meekly, and with no discernible result whatever of her labours, to their place. The moment that Archie and her father left the house with Major Seton, Bettina prepared herself for action; and rushing away to Mr Lovell's room, threw herself, with true fanatical ardour, upon the first initiatory task of turning

every piece of furniture it possessed inside out. This done, she had devoted half an hour or so to the dismemberment of her own bureaus; then returned, meted out and subdivided her husband's wardrobe until tall pyramids of cloth (looking each of them not very unlike Mr Lovell himself) were dotted at random all over his floor; and finally, faithful to her principle of making every part of the habitation untenable at the same moment, had betaken herself, after a discursive but thorough routing of two presses of house linen on her road, to Archie's room.

The usual shortcomings with regard to hooks and buttons; the usual chaos of gloves that wouldn't match; unmended stockings; boots spoilt with salt water, and frocks grown too short in the skirt; "and every one of her white dresses in the wash at once," thought Bettina, shaking her head despondently, as with paper and pencil in her hand she sought in vain for any coherent article wherewith to head her list. "I'd better begin with the ball-dress after all. That at least must be in a condition to describe." And with honourable pride she unpinned the white linen wrapper in which she had encased all the paraphernalia of Archie's one night of dissipation, and prepared herself to take a leisurely inventory of its contents.

"Upper skirt of white grenadine: item, puffed under skirt of ditto: item, white silk body and trimmings: item, clear Swiss muslin skirt." The upper skirt, the puffed skirt, the white silk body and trimmings, all there to cry "adsum." But where was the clear Swiss muslin skirt?

With the tightening of the heart that is said to prelude the oncoming of any dread discovery, Bettina made a convulsive dash at a tower of half-clean skirts resting on poor Archie's little bed, and found it. It! The skirt for which she had paid two francs fifty centimes the mètre, which her own hands had folded and left fair and unsullied with the rest, now a blackened tumbled rag! (I record what Bettina thought) trodden out in the hem; torn away from the gathers; and with a good half-yard of mingled dust and mud as a trimming round the bottom of the skirt.

Mrs Lovell staggered back against the washstand—the only thing untenanted by clothes in the room—and one solitary word rose to her lips—Jeanneton! As a clever detective by a single,

seemingly unimportant fact—the impress of a foot, the wadding out of a pistol—first gets hold of a clue that shall enable him to follow the tortuous windings of crime, and ultimately discover its guilty author, so did Bettina, on the spot, evolve a whole labyrinth of mystery and of crime from the condition of those nine yards of torn and blackened muslin. And the key-note to that crime, the solution to that mystery was—Jeanneton.

Mrs Lovell had long held opinions from which no argument could move her, as to the fatal results of allowing foreign servant-girls their liberty with regard to processions, fêtes, balls, and the like diversions. "We know what such things would lead to in England," she used to say, when Mr Lovell would try to put in a word about the allowance to be made for varying custom, temperament, religions, in different countries; "the depraved inclinations of the lower classes *must* be the same everywhere." Here was blackest confirmation of her opinions! Here was refutation direct of all fine sentimental theories about the necessity of giving these light-hearted peasants their innocent amusements! Here was proof incontestable of what such amusement and such theories led to! In the absence of her master and mistress—doubtless when Archie, poor child, was asleep—this creature had dressed herself up in all the finery she could collect; gone off to some guingette, some Godless place of unhallowed out-of-door revelry, and waltzed there (in muslin that cost two francs fifty centimes the mètre) till morning.

"Well for me if my trinkets are right," thought Bettina. "Well for me if the light-hearted peasant did not make herself up a cap out of my best point-lace!" And actually bristling with rage, so vividly did this revolting image rise before her imagination, she stalked off, bearing on her arm the muslin skirt, the direct and positive proof of the *corpus delicti*, into her own apartment.

A moment's glance told her that her point d'Alençon was intact, and her jewel-box also. "The woman would not risk a felony," she thought, with crushing bitterness. "Point-lace and trinkets would have set the secret police upon her track at once." The secret police was one of Bettina's strongest beliefs; was, indeed, the only portion of the French nation for whom she had the

faintest respect. "Pocket-handkerchiefs, silk stockings, the nice etceteras of the toilet, would be nearer her mark."

However, not a handkerchief, not a stocking, not an etcetera of any kind was missing; and Bettina was about to give up further search, half satisfied, half in disappointment—so inscrutable is woman's nature!—when her eyes fell upon a minute portion of silver-paper, sticking out from one corner of the lid of her best parasol case; the grey silk that dear Madame Bonnechose of Amiens had presented to her on New Year's day. To open the case, to unfold the paper wrappings, and put up the parasol, was the work of a second: and now—now a sight did meet Mrs Lovell's gaze which made the blood turn to fire within her veins. The parasol which she had last worn on Easter Sunday, had last gazed at in pristine immaculate purity, was ridged, engrained, covered with marks of black; a certain wavy appearance round the edge of these defilements showed that a guilty hand had tried in vain to rub them out, and a faint smell of benzine, extracted doubtless from her own bottle on the chimney-piece, told how the commission of the whole crime must have been of recent date.

"She could not have worn a parasol at night;" this was Mrs Lovell's first thought. "Then Archie must have given her leave to go out in the day-time," her second. And resolved to bring the offender to instant and condign punishment, she went forth that moment into the corridor and called aloud, and in no sweet or conciliatory tone, to her stepdaughter to come to her.

Archie had been in the house about five minutes, and was sitting alone in the salon in her walking dress, thinking still of the blessings of Philistinism, when she heard the sharp metallic ring of Mrs Lovell's voice.

"Oh, now for the old story," thought the girl; "so many buttons wanting, so many boots spoilt, so many dresses at the wash. What a pleasant preface to all that I have got to say!" And she sauntered slowly off to Bettina's room, stopping to look out of every window she passed on the way, and singing aloud little Italian snatches about republicanism and liberty, as it was her habit to do whenever she felt that one of her stepmother's sermons was in store for her.

"Well, Bettina, child, what is it?" she cried, as she entered the room, throwing up her sailor's hat in the air and catching it as she walked. "Fourteen hooks and eyes, twenty-two buttons, a dozen—"

And then Miss Lovell stopped short—stopped short; and as long as she lived, I fancy, never played at ball with her hat again! Ostentatiously outspread upon two chairs before her was the white muslin skirt; the grey parasol open on the floor; the whole air of the room faintly redolent of benzine; and Bettina, like an angry spirit, standing, pointing, with heated face and vengeful eyes, to these mute evidences of her guilt.

"You—you want me, Bettina?" she stammered.

Mrs Lovell for answer walked straight up to the door, shut and locked it, and then returned to her stepdaughter's side. "Archie," she said, "I don't say to you tell me the truth. That, I believe, you always do. I ask you a plain question, and know that you will answer it on your honour. Why did you let Jeanneton go out after all I said to you?"

"Because she wanted to go," said Archie, her eyes sinking on the floor. "She wanted a holiday, and I thought it hard she should keep in, only me to wait on, and I let her go."

"At what time?"

"At about two or three—I really did not look at the clock."

"And when did she return?"

"When did she return?" faltered the girl, her heart beating so loud that she thought Bettina must have heard its throbs.

"Yes: when did she return? Speak out, child. I am not going to be angry with you."

"She came back—oh, Bettina, don't send her away—don't do anything to prevent other people taking her when we're gone. She came back this morning about eight. You know her village is a good two leagues away. I know she wanted to go and see her grandfather—"

"Her grandfather!" cried Bettina, in the tone which among women of her stamp so admirably takes the place of the strong words current among wicked men; "her grandfather, indeed. Yes, I suppose so. Light-hearted foreign peasants must have their amusements, your papa says, and their family affections too:

their grandfathers! and must visit them in their mistress's clothes: clear muslin slips at two-fifty the mètre, and French-grey parasols. Oh, certainly!"

Mrs Lovell seated herself in a position of acrid discomfort upon about three inches of a heavily-piled chair; and tapped one of her feet viciously upon the floor for a minute or so. "I don't know that I was ever so insulted by a servant in my life before," she burst forth at last. "And it's not for the worth of the things alone—not for the worth of the things she has destroyed—but for her insolence in wearing them, and her cruelty in leaving you. Away all night, and you, child as you are, here alone! You might have been murdered! we might have lost every ounce of plate we are worth! but she shall go this day. Don't speak a word, Archie, don't speak a word." Bettina's eyes were in a blaze. "I'm not angry with you now, but I shall be if you speak a word. She shall go this day. A parasol that would have lasted me for years, and worked in to the very grain of the silk with this filthy benzine. Let no one ever tell me French servants are not depraved again—depraved to the very core!"

Then Archie raised her eyes to her stepmother's face: "Bettina," she cried, with desperate courage; "you are wrong. It was not Jeanneton who took the parasol, but me. I wanted to look nice, and I put on my new slip for a dress, and took your parasol, and I tried to clean it this morning, so that you shouldn't know, and —and somehow the stuff made it run, and I'll save all my money, and buy you another when we go to England!" she added, piteously. "Indeed, indeed I will, Bettina."

Mrs Lovell rose; and without saying a word, re-examined the muslin skirt, breadth by breadth, the torn hem, the disorganized gathers, the half-yard of black mud for trimming. "Archie," she said, when her examination was over; "you are not telling me the truth. You are trying to screen Jeanneton, but it will not do. Where do you mean to tell me that you wore these things?"

"On the pier first," began Archie, with thickening breath.

"But on the pier there is no black mud at all," interrupted Bettina; and on the pier you would not have had your clothes torn off your back; and on the pier the parasol would not have got grimed in dirt. Dirt! dirt is no word for it. 'Tis simply

black—London black! and what beats my comprehension to understand is how the woman, vicious as she is, could have contrived to get it into such a state."

And now Archie, with hands tight clasped over her beating heart, felt that the time had come when she must speak. "London black. You are quite right. That's what it is, Bettina, and I tell you I did it, and Jeanneton is no more to blame than you."

Bettina stared at her in blank stupefaction. "I don't know what you mean, child," she cried, feeling frightened, she knew not why. "I don't know what nonsense this is that you are trying to tell me. You! you have never been in London since you were born."

"And if I was to tell you that I *have!*" exclaimed Archie, with sudden energy; "that I walked down to the pier to see Mr Durant off, and then the sea looked so nice that I went out with him in a boat, and then—only to see it, you know—I went on board the steamer, and it started before I knew what I was about, and I went on to London, and stayed there two hours or more, and came back in the middle of the night by myself—if I was to tell you all this, and declare it to be true, what should you say to me, Bettina?"

The parasol, the skirt, dropped out of Mrs Lovell's hands: a sickly greenish hue overspread her face.

"Does anybody know?" she gasped. The strongest instinct of her nature holding her true, even in an exigence like this, to the sacred cause of conventionality rather than of abstract right.

"No one," answered Archie, boldly; "or to the best of my belief no one. Jeanneton had left before I started, and there was no one on the pier when I came back this morning—except Captain Waters, and I don't believe it possible that he could have seen me."

"And you—were in London—alone—with Mr Durant?" but no words, no punctuation, can express the series of little spasms with which Bettina jerked out these questions. "Alone, you say, and they live close to your father's rectory. Archie, miserable child, do you know what this is that you have done?"

"Certainly, I know," cried Miss Lovell, not without a half-smile

at the ludicrous stony terror of Bettina's face. "I went on board the steamer, foolishly I'll allow, and off it started, and—"

"And you have ruined us! Just that. Ruined your father and me and yourself! Now laugh if you like!" Mrs Lovell wept. "After the religious way I've brought you up," she sobbed, "and to choose the very time when your papa is made a dignitary of the church to disgrace yourself—"

And she rocked herself in a manner highly suggestive of hysterics from side to side as she sat.

Archie watched her stepmother with a curious set look about her handsome lips; a curious hard expression in her blue eyes. "You are thoroughly unjust to me, Bettina," she said at last. "I am as sorry about the parasol as you can be, and about the expense too, for we shall have to send Mr Durant forty-two shillings and a sixpence that he lent me on the journey, and I know now I was foolish to go on board the steamer, or even to see him off at all if you like. But when you use such words as disgrace and ruin, I say you are unjust. I have done nothing wrong. I have disgraced nobody."

And she walked across the room and seated herself sullenly by the window; the window from whence she had watched Ralph Seton arrive that morning. "If I had told papa first, as I ought to have done, I shouldn't have been judged so harshly!" she cried, after a silence, broken only by occasional rushing sobs on the part of Bettina. "Papa will never call me disgraced as long as I do nothing that is really wrong."

"No, your papa will not see disgrace when all other people would see it!" answered Bettina. "His simplicity, his trust, should have kept you straight." Ah, how well do women know where to pierce through the weakest part of each other's armour! "Your papa lives in his clocks and his cabinets, and knows about as much of the world of men and women as a baby. *He* would think nothing of it, poor fellow; but when all the world, when his parishioners, when the family at the Court, know of it, it's not very difficult to foretell what they will say of him!"

"And what, pray?" exclaimed Archie, aflush with indignation at the bare mention of her father being lightly spoken of. "Supposing everything known—supposing people should call me foolish

or wicked or anything they choose, what has that got to do with papa?"

"Everything," answered Mrs Lovell, curtly. "It has got everything to do with him, and his good name, and his reputation, and his prospects in life. If you were a boy, Archie—and if it wasn't like disputing with Providence, I wish from my heart you were one—you might be as wild as wild can be. You might commit any crime—forgery even—for I remember there was the Earl of Somebody's eldest son, only I'm too agitated to remember names—and still pull round, and everything be forgotten. But a girl! No false step a girl makes *can* be got over, unless perhaps in the very highest circles, which we are not. Oh, it's very well to say there is no real difference!" This, as Archie, with quivering lips, was about to speak. "And I know the Scripture makes none; and, indeed, I always myself have thought it hard. . . . However"—and Bettina rescued herself with a start from the dreadful depths of heresy to which she was falling—"what we've got to think of is what the world says. You have done one of the things no woman can ever recover from if it becomes known. You have been away—that I should sit here and say it calmly—for hours and hours in the company of a young man, and your good name is as much gone—but I'm too agitated, too miserable, to go into details. No honest young girl knowing this would associate with you. No man knowing it would marry you. And as to the county families noticing us—"

Mrs Lovell covered up her face in her pocket-handkerchief, and for a minute or two there was dead silence between them. Then Archie left her place by the window, crossed the room, and stood erect and tearless, but white to her very lips, by her step-mother's side. "Bettina," she said, in a voice from which all the old fresh childish ring seemed to have suddenly died, "is this true that you are telling me? Would papa be so badly spoken of if this thing that I have done got known?"

"He would be bli—bli—blighted," sobbed Bettina, fiercely. "For another man it would be bad enough, but for a clergyman such disgrace—"

"That will do," interrupted Archie. "You need not repeat that word so often, I think. And no one would marry me!" with

a little hard attempt at a laugh at this; "and the families in the county wouldn't know us! Would they continue to be on terms with Mr Gerald Durant, do you suppose?"

"Archie, don't drive me wild by asking such absurd questions! You, a girl of seventeen, to talk like a child of seven! Mr Gerald Durant! Why, of course, people would look upon the affair as something rather in his favour than otherwise. Who ever thinks worse of a young man for such an escapade as this?"

"But Mr Durant is eight years older than me, Bettina. If going to London with him was a thing to disgrace me so fearfully, he must have known it, and I would have landed at Calais, when the steamer stopped, if he had only spoken a word of all this. I went on, as I told him, because a number of the Morteville people were there, and I thought papa would be hurt if they got up a story about my landing so far away from home alone. Why didn't Mr Durant save me when he might have done it?"

"Because no one ever saves anybody," said Bettina, bringing out this clinching truth with stinging emphasis. "Any one on earth hearing the story would say that *you* were to blame throughout, and that Mr Durant just acted as any other young man would have done under the circumstances. Save you! If you had attended more to your religious exercises, Archie, to the books, the evening readings you have made so light of, you wouldn't have looked to anything but yourself, and your own self-respect, to save you when the time of temptation came."

"Ah, unfortunately I was not remembering myself at all just then—only papa." And then she turned away, and pacing hurriedly up and down the room, began to think—not of her own folly; of her own threatened shame; of the share Gerald had really had in her guilt; of Bettina's, of the world's injustice: these thoughts were for the future—but of her father. Her father on the threshold of a new life, and with all the honour and peace that would have made that life sweet to him, darkened by *her*.

"Bettina," she exclaimed, stopping at last in her walk, "I don't see the absolute necessity of this story of mine ever being known; do you?"

"That entirely depends," said Mrs Lovell, drearily, her mind at once taking hold of the practical, not the moral, difficulty of the

case. "In the first place, this Mr Gerald Durant will be quite sure some day to talk about it all himself—"

"No," interrupted Archie, "I am sure he won't—weak and vain though he may be!" she added, with a suppressed bitterness very new to hear in her voice.

"Well, perhaps not," answered Bettina, "though I would never trust any man long with a secret that was flattering to his own vanity. The next thing is, did any one see you when you landed here? You may think not, but, depend upon it, some one did. I've remarked all my life that if you have got on a new dress, or are walking with a good acquaintance, or successful in any way, people seem to keep indoors on purpose rather than see you; but the moment you're looking shabby or poor, or walking with somebody you are ashamed of, you seem to meet everybody you know in the world in flocks. Of course, some one saw you. Why, you said just now that Captain Waters met you on the pier when you landed."

"But if—if I could be sure no one else saw me, or of not being betrayed by him, would you think it right, for papa's sake, I mean, Bettina, that we should try to hush the story of all this up?"

"I think," said Bettina, with solemn energy, "that we should be wicked and ungrateful to Providence if we did not do everything in our power to hush it up! I think that if, by extraordinary good fortune, you did go and return unseen (which I cannot believe), we ought never, even among ourselves, to let this thing be spoken of again. You are young, child,"—and for the first time Bettina's face began to soften at the sight of the girl's rigid, tight-clasped hands and wide-open tearless eyes—"and I'm not harsh on you in my heart, only I know it *is* just one of the things there is no getting over, and Mr Durant engaged to his cousin, too—which of course would make all the family harder upon you—and after the way I have brought you up! and just when your papa has been made a dignitary of the church and everything . . . however, we'll talk over what can be done, and in the right frame, Archie, the right and humble frame upon which alone, poor worms of an hour as we are! we can expect a blessing."

After which curious confusion of entomological and other metaphors, Mrs Lovell, with the peculiar tottering gait which

women of her way of thinking invariably assume under trouble, went off to her own apartment for her smelling-salts, a clean pocket-handkerchief, and a pile of good books, with which armoury of affliction she presently returned, evidently determined to make a night of it in her step-daughter's room.

But her step-daughter had no such intention for her. Her first horror over at hearing the position in which she stood put into words, Archie Lovell's courage, determination, stout rebellious spirit, all returned to her. "Bettina," she said, catching hold of her step-mother's arm with a suddenness that in her present weak state flattened her up, smelling-salts, good books, and all, against the door, and, wearing to Mrs Lovell's horror, something of the old devil-may-care expression on her face, "it's a settled thing, is it? I must do my best first to get Captain Waters to be silent, and for ourselves we are going, if we can, to tell a falsehood, any number of falsehoods, you and I, about this journey of mine to London?"

"Tell—oh, Archie! I hope we shall never have to speak of it even while we live."

"Very well, Bettina, we'll put it as prettily as we can. Not tell, but act falsehoods. First to papa, of course, for if he knew a thing—poor papa!" her voice faltering, "every one else in the world would know it too; next to the whole of the parishioners, churchwardens, whatever the people are called that belong to rectors, when I stand by and hear how I have never been in England before, et cetera; to the family at the Court, above all; and to Major Seton; and to, or rather with, Mr Durant when I see him; and some day," with the little hard laugh again, "to any happy man whom we can deceive into wanting to marry me? This we have decided upon doing—haven't we?"

"Oh, Archie, don't look so hardened! don't laugh, child, when you ought to be on your bended knees, praying that your heart of stone might be changed into a heart of flesh! It's very wicked of you to use such a word as falsehood at all. There are circumstances in which even on the highest authority we know that concealment is permitted. At chapter ten—"

"Bettina," interrupted Archie, with the blood mounting crimson to her forehead, and stamping one little foot angrily on the floor,

"for mercy's sake let us have none of this, please! I have done a foolish thing that lasted one day, and now I am going to do a mean one that will last all the days of my life! And of my own free will, mind, and not for papa's sake alone. I don't want to be disgraced. I don't want not to be noticed. I don't want to think that no one would marry me—but I won't have any goody talk about it! I won't bear of texts that bear us out in our meanness —as if you couldn't distort some text for everything wicked that was ever done! and above all, I won't have tears and lamentations and smelling-bottles. If we can hush it all up there is no great harm done; and if we cannot, we cannot. In either case there is no use crying and bemoaning and pretending to pray to heaven when we are only hoping we shan't be found out on earth. You've been piling up all papa's clothes into pyramids as usual, I see, Bettina; and now the best thing you can do is to go and write your list out, and put them in their places again."

And Miss Lovell burst into a fit of laughter that if not thoroughly real was loud enough to reach Mr Lovell in his painting room at the other side of the house, and made him think, and rejoice to think, how happy his little girl was at the good fortune that had befallen them!

Archie laughed on as she watched Bettina obediently bear back the books and smelling-bottle to her own room; and she sang aloud—the same kind of songs she sang to the two old English ladies in the train—as long as she knew her step-mother's door was open, and that she could be heard. Only when Mrs Lovell had shut herself in, and when all the house was silent, and the girl felt that she was alone at last, did the songs die on her lips and the laughter too. And then she walked up to her glass, and looking hard into her own face for companionship, asked herself, blankly, what manner of shame this was that she had incurred.

Disgrace! Ruin! No young girl, if this story was known, would associate with her: no man would seek to marry her. Bettina said this; and Bettina understood the world; and higher authority than Bettina had she none. Never in her life before, she thought, had she looked so pretty as at this minute. The bright blood was burning clear through her dark cheeks. A light

such as she never knew that they could wear was in her eyes. Her hair, with the evening light its changing hues shone, like an aureole of pure gold, around her face.

An intense pity for herself, an intense regret for all that she had newly thrown away, came into her childish heart. "I will not be disgraced, I will not!" she thought, passionately. "I am too good for disgrace and ruin! Major Seton thought I was pretty—didn't his face change when I threw him my myrtle? and Gerald Durant thought so, and liked me better than Lucia, with all her classic lines! I *am* pretty; too pretty not to be liked and admired and loved. If I was old, four or five and twenty, and plain, it would be different. I think I could be honourable and tell the truth then, but not now. I'm only seventeen, and I want people to fall in love with me, and pay me attention, and think me handsome (piquante, mignonne, belle aux yeux bleus—those were Gerald's words for me!). I want all the county people to make much of papa and to have me at their parties. . . If I look then as I do now, Gerald will be sure to ask me to dance oftener than Miss Durant the heiress. . . . And Major Seton—ah, how Ralph would despise me if he knew to what I have sunk! what a falsehood I have told him—what a falsehood all my future life is going to be!"

And at the thought of Ralph the mobile nature softened in a moment; the heart of stone, as Bettina would have said, was changed into a heart of flesh. Archie's head sank upon her breast for a minute or two; her lips quivered piteously; and then a flood of the hottest tears that she had ever shed was the unheroic termination of all her fortitude and all her courage.

Quite late in the evening, as Mr Lovell was standing before "Troy," his pipe in his mouth, and dreaming dreams of greatness as was his wont, his daughter came in, neither singing nor chattering, but pale, subdued, and silent, and crept up to his side. The daylight had well-nigh faded; but Mr Lovell could see that her face was pinched and white; and that all the glorious tawny hair was pinned up tightly, giving her a strange altered look of womanhood, around her head.

"Archie, my little girl, you are pale," holding her face up be-

tween his hands, and scrutinizing it closely, "and all your hair pinned and twisted up like an old woman's! Is this some whim of Bettina's, or what?"

"It's my own fancy, papa," she answered, "and you must let me keep it so, please. Now that we are going to England, you know, it wouldn't do for me, at my age, to wear my hair hanging about like a child's."

"Why not?" said Mr Lovell, "and what are you but a child? If I like to see you so, why should you care for fashion, Archie?"

She had to turn her face away before she could answer: it caused her such new, such poignant pain to say or look otherwise than as she felt to him: then, after a minute, "I care for what you think of me more than for all the fashion in the world," she said. "You believe that? But I know that there are a great many things I must alter about myself now. Running about here in Morteville, as Archie Wilson, and with you only a poor artist, you know, dear, I may have been very well"—("Very well, indeed," Mr Lovell interpolates)—"but living among English people and the daughter of a rector, I should be thought wild and unlike other people, and so I'm going to reform myself at once by braiding up my red hair round my head, and leaving off my sailor's hat, and trying if I can to look like a lady, not a boy."

"You will not be as good-looking, child. But of course you and Bettina will do as you choose!"

"And you will like me just the same, papa?" a wistful tremor in her voice. "Whatever I was, plain or pretty, or wicked or good, you would like me just the same!"

"My little one." This was all Mr Lovell answered: but with what a world of tenderness! every note in the diapason of love softly swept by those three words: "My little one!"

She took one of his hands into hers, and so they stood together, as their way was at this hour, saying little and both gazing at the indistinct glories of "Troy," less unlike nature now than at any other hour in the twenty-four, until the canvas insensibly melted into the grey walls of the painting-room, and Jeanneton's voice was heard generally announcing from the kitchen-door, after the manner of a gong or dinner-bell, that supper was on the table.

"So ends our last look at Troy," remarked Mr Lovell, as they

turned to go away; "or our last look at it in Morteville-sur-mer. Seton tells me I am wanted in the parish at once, and to-morrow morning I shall set about packing up my pictures the first thing."

"So ends the last evening of the poor old life," added Archie, lingering at the threshold of the room where so many peaceful hours of her child's existence had been passed. "Shall we ever be as happy now that we are Philistines as we have been here, I wonder?"

"We shall have four hundred a year, instead of being beggars!" cried Bettina, who had been reading good books and pondering over the chances of discovery, until her temper was anything but sweet. "And I think it quite time for you, for *you*, Archie, to have done with that profane talk about Philistines. Pour vous Jeanneton," and she turned round with sudden animosity upon the servant: "je vous dismisse. Ce jour semaine vous allez; and, *sang charactere*, vous souvenez, *sang charactere*."

If their own reputation was to be damaged it was something, Bettina felt, to be able to send forth this worthless creature also, *sang charactere*, to the world. Something. Not a satisfaction, of course. She was too Christian a woman to take any delight in the misfortunes of others. But a duty which, at this season of trial, she had an excessively righteous relish in performing.

CHAPTER XXII.

A VAMPIRE "AT HOME."

It was getting on for ten o'clock that night when Captain Waters, in a full suit of black, and with every nice adjunct of dandy evening-dress—primrose gloves, bouquet for the button-hole, lilliputian tie, embroidered shirt—faultlessly complete, sauntered away from the door of the Couronne d'Argent. During the last few days invitations for a high tea to be held by Miss Marks on this third evening of August had been current among the English society of Morteville, and to Miss Marks' house Captain

Waters, sorely against the convictions of his life with regard to tea in general, was now going.

Miss Gussy inhabited with her papa a modest lodging in one of the least airy parts of Morteville. Of Mr Marks it is needless to say more than that he was a frightened-looking, dilapidated old person, consuming a good deal of snuff and very little soap (one of the poor, broken down old men, redolent in France of absinthe, and in England of gin and water, who do possess daughters like Gussy, and live in shady suburbs of shady watering-places); to whom on all festive occasions Miss Gussy said briefly, "Go to bed, pa," and he went. Of the lodging, that it was *entre cour et jardin*, surrounded, that is, by high damp walls, take it on which-ever side you liked, and pervaded by a nameless flavour of bygone meals, mould, and snuff: the ghosts perhaps of generations of old lodgers all of the stamp of Mr Marks: the walls covered with dis-located chalk-drawings—carved frames and all the work of Miss Marks' own fair hand—and the furniture generally belonging to that type of squalid tawdriness, threadbare finery, gilding, decay, and dirt combined, which ordinarily characterizes the third or fourth class French lodging-houses of towns like Morteville. A type which the pen that drew the boarding-house Vauquer in the Père Goriot alone could reproduce in its integrity.

Miss Marks you have already seen; and I have only to record that on this special evening she wore, in her capacity of hostess, a white muslin frock, with a sash carelessly knotted behind, sleeves tied up on the shoulder, like an infant going to be christened, and a simple bit of blue ribbon in her hair. "As if she was fifteen, not five and thirty," whispered Mrs Maloney to one of her friends the minute she entered. "A waist a yard and a quarter round, and a sash. *Dear* Gussy, how well you are looking!" and they kiss. "The madonna style of braiding back the hair suits your face so exactly."

Mrs Maloney herself was in a green silk: in the green silk, rather—the Maloney silk was a case in speaking of which the definite article is admissible. Fearfully and wonderfully full-dressed—to use the favourite irony of the fashion-books—though this ancient beauty loved to be in a ball-room, she held it correct taste to appear in what she termed "demmy toilets" at small

parties. Hence the green silk, chastely trimmed with imitation Cluny lace, was cut high upon the shoulders, but beautifully less, as one sees in Sir Peter Lely's portraits, beneath the throat: a style admirably suited to the plump Dolly Varden figure which Mrs Maloney in her heart believed herself to possess. Rows of inexpensive pearl beads were twisted, repeatedly but in vain, around the yellow shrivelled neck; and under one poor withered ear, playfully nestling amidst hair which "Batchelor's World-famed Fluid" had converted into lustrous purple, shot in side-lights with rainbow hues of pink and green, was a single moss rose-bud: emblem of love, and youth, and innocent freshness, like its wearer.

As Waters entered the room, his opera-hat under his arm, his eyes fell upon these two young creatures, who both looked up at him with a coy little start as he approached; and intent upon getting over the work before him as quickly as possible, he at once walked across the room in his quiet well-bred way, and after saluting Miss Marks and receiving her playful reproaches for being so late, seated himself on a pile of music-books—the safest resting-place in the room Captain Waters thought—at Mrs Maloney's side.

"Not playing whist, Mrs Maloney?" he remarked, glancing towards a pair of quivering shoulders, and one mammoth elbow, on his right, and forming inductive guesses—as a comparative anatomist from the shin-bone of a megatherium might infer the history of an epoch—as to the probable existence of Mrs O'Rourke's partner, adversaries, and a whist-table. "How is it that you and Miss Marks are both sitting out to-night?"

"Me?" cried the girl Gussy, giddily, if not with the grammar one would have expected from an author of her repute. "Me play whist? Why, you have to remember all the horrid cards, and sit ever so long without opening your lips! Fancy me being silent and remembering anything for two minutes together." Archly this, and with a toss of her head and a little scream such as children do unconsciously break forth with in the bib-and-tucker stage of existence. "We have been playing Beggar-my-neighbour for bonbons, Captain Waters," she added with pretty simplicity, "and Mr Montacute, dreadful creature! has already beaten me out of two games."

At the mention of Mr Montacute, Waters looked more closely behind the screen of Miss Gussy's voluminous muslin draperies, and at last perceived, very blushing and frightened, little Willie Montacute, well secured in a corner, and helplessly grasping a time-honoured and adhesive pack of cards in his hand. Miss Marks, when she did run a victim to earth, had a plan of stopping him by thus outstretching herself, bodily as it were, before the path to freedom; and with very young boys, or very feeble old men, generally found the feint, for one evening, a successful one.

"Ah, Willie, my boy, how are you?" said Waters. "On your feet again, then, after your sea-sickness? Would you believe it, Mrs Maloney, though the sea was as smooth as glass, that fellow managed to be ill last night on our way from Calais here?"

"There was a deuced heavy swell," said Master Montacute, "and it wasn't really the sea at all, but the poisonous dinner we got at Calais—"

"Of course," interrupted Waters, good-humouredly; he is in high good humour with every one this evening. "It is never the sea that makes people ill. You ought to have come with us," he added, turning carelessly to Mrs Maloney. "We had a very pleasant day, barring the heat, and saw a good deal, really, that was worth seeing."

"Ahem, so I hear!" answered the Maloney, drawing down her thin upper lip with unction; "a great deal that, in one deplorable sense, *was* very well worth seeing, Captain Waters."

Waters raised his eyes for half a second to her face, and knew that his suspicions were correct; that he had done right in coming to this atrocious tea-party after all. "The peasants?" he suggested innocently. "Well, in masses they did look picturesque, didn't they, Miss Marks? Just when Monseigneur was blessing them, and with flags waving and incense swinging—but when you see them close, the ugliness of the women in this part of France is something, really—"

"Oh, peasants!" interrupted Mrs Maloney, tapping Waters upon the arm with her fan with shrivelled playfulness. "Sure you know as well as I do, Captain Waters, that it's not peasants I'm thinking of."

"What, then?" asked Waters, putting up his eye-glass and

looking about him with the dazed look that his white inanimate face was so well fitted to express. "Miss Marks, you were there. What was this interesting sight that I had the stupidity to miss at Calais?"

"Are you sure you did Miss it?" said Gussy, lowering her voice, and bringing her great bird-like eyes to bear upon Waters in a way that, it is only just to state, he never would have allowed save in the execution of business. "You certainly were in the best position on the pier for seeing everything when it occurred."

Waters was silent: then a faint smile just parted his lips, and for a minute or two he examined curiously the bunch of charms which hung from his watch-chain. "Ladies are terribly sharp observers," he remarked, at length; "but I positively do not know what you mean on this particular occasion. My friend Durant was on board an excursion steamer bound for London, and I spoke to him. Had this anything to do with the circumstances you are speaking of?"

"Oh, Captain Waters, how ridiculous you are to pretend such innocence!" cried Gussy, warming. "When you *must* have seen just as plain as I did."

"Seen what? I give you my honour I am as utterly in the dark as ever."

But even this valuable offer did not change Miss Marks in her opinions. "I can tell by your face that you know everything, Captain Waters. Mr Durant had a companion with him, and that companion was—Archie Wilson!"

Captain Waters literally started two inches from the music-books; his eye-glass fell down with a crash against the admirable counterfeits of diamonds that he wore as shirt studs. "Miss Wilson? Oh!" with a change of countenance that, as a bit of finished drawing-room comedy, would not have discredited Charles Mathews himself. "That is excellent! Durant run away with Miss Wilson! I must tell him about this the first letter I write. Why, Archie Wilson is in Morteville at this minute," he added, keenly noting all the time the effect that his abilities were producing on his audience. "I was talking to her and her father not three hours ago at the door of their own house."

"Oh, so we hear!" cried the Maloney, bridling; "*so* we hear.

Miss Wilson is back in Morteville already, and in my humble opinion this shows pretty clearly what kind of person she is. After an esclandre of this kind to dare to face us all again! Only that—really," casting down her eyes timidly, "I don't know the subject is one fit for us to discuss, I should say that Archie Wilson would have shown herself to be a shade—a shade less hardened if she had stopped away from Morteville altogether!"

Whereupon Captain Waters laughed—smiled, I mean. The man had not laughed for years. "I never heard a better thing than this in my life!" he exclaimed; "never. What, in the name of everything that is ridiculous, Mrs Maloney, makes you fix upon Archie Lovell as Durant's companion?"

"Oh, my authority is Miss Marks?" answered Maloney, promptly. "Let Miss Marks speak for herself. I know nothing whatever about it, except what Miss Marks has told me."

"Well, then, Miss Marks, will you tell me, please? I should not like to lose a word of this new and horrible scandal about Archie Wilson."

And thus adjured, Gussy spoke. She was not as near as Captain Waters, of course, but she saw Archie Wilson distinctly at Mr Durant's side. Recognized the sailor's hat and blue veil; the white dress; recognized the whole figure of the girl herself. Not her face, certainly, for her veil was down; and the Miss Montacutes and Mr Montacute—here Willie, with vehement blushes, begged that he might not be brought forward in any way—recognized her, too. By what steamer Miss Wilson might have returned she knew not. That Miss Wilson was Mr Durant's companion on board the steamer that stopped at the Calais Pier she would declare on oath.

"And I," said Waters, rising quietly from his place, and speaking in an intentionally clear and distinct voice, "I will declare, on oath, that the whole story is impossible! I went down this morning to see the first steamer arrive from Folkestone, and Archie Wilson was on the pier before me. I stood not twenty paces from her as I waited to see the steamer come in."

A general hush: even the whist-players interested—for every one in the room, every English person in Morteville, had already heard Miss Marks' whispered story of Archie's flight. "I happen,"

continued Waters, "luckily for my friend's daughter, to be able to swear to her being on the pier before the arrival of the steamer this morning, and if you like it, Miss Marks, I can do more. I can tell you who the young person you saw on board the Lord of the Isles really was."

"Oh, I'm sure I want to hear no more about it!" cried Gussy, growing scarlet as every pair of eyes in the room turned upon her. "If it was not Archie Wilson, and of course you have proved to us it was not, Captain Waters, I will say no more about it—and will never trust the evidence of my eyes again while I live!" she added, under her breath.

"Well," said Waters, deliberately, and stroking his floss-silk moustache into infinitesimal points while he looked at Gussy's face, "as for saying no more about it, Miss Marks, I don't know. When an accusation as serious as this has been openly brought against a lady, I conceive it to be the duty of the accusers to contradict what they have stated as soon as they are themselves convinced of their mistake."

The voice of Mrs O'Rourke, with the sound it ever assumed after dinner—a hollow rumbling sound, as of a volcano deadened by the weight of much superincumbent strata—here remarked, "There were some persons whom no scandal could damage. An accusation more or less against Archie Wilson would really matter little."

"The remark is just," said Waters, with cold impertinence; he knew himself to be on the eve of leaving Morteville, and able therefore to be indifferent about Mrs O'Rourke's dinners—"the application faulty. There are persons, Mrs O'Rourke—whose authority, but yours, should one accept on such a point?—whom no scandal could damage, but Archie Wilson is not one of them. Archie Wilson!" he interrupted himself, suddenly, and as if he had not been gradually working up to this climax from the first moment he entered the room, "no, I will speak of her so no longer. The necessity for the incognito is over. Archie Lovell is the daughter of a man of position and birth. Her father is the rector of Hatton, in Staffordshire, her grandfather is Lord Lovell, and it is unfit that the ribald talk of Morteville tongues should even go near her. Ladies, of course, have their own prerogative!" added Waters, looking with a sneer at Mrs Maloney and Miss Marks.

"They may talk as they choose without peril. If any man still thinks that Miss Lovell accompanied Durant away from Morteville, I should be very happy to talk over the matter with him in any spirit or at any time that he chooses."

And Waters glanced round him with the warlike aspect he had learnt in Italian cafés, and twirled up his well-waxed moustaches till little Willie Montacute thanked his stars he, for one, had not been fool enough to give an opinion in the matter. Reckless bravery, never terminating in bloodshed, was one of Waters' leading characteristics; and the present moment, with a room full of women, one little boy, and three trembling old gentlemen, all rather deaf, and mildly playing at threepenny whist, was, he felt, just an occasion to display it.

"Rector of Hatton—*Lord* Lovell!" gasped Gussy; no one showing any eagerness in the picking up of Captain Waters' gauntlet. "Well, it's very strange, but I always did think Mr—Mr Lovell had a look of birth about him, and Archie, if you recollect, Mrs Maloney?" Maloney looks stonily forgetful of everything. "I've often said to you, I thought there was something *distingué* about her face. Poor little girl, I'm sure I'm very glad this last story has all turned out to be a mistake!"

"And will do your best, I am convinced," said Waters, with emphasis, "to see that the story is contradicted. Ladies, I have the honour of wishing you good-night."

After which—regardless of conviviality in the form of *vin-ordinaire* negus, four *brioches* on one plate, and three *patés* on another, that a hired old waiter, mouldy, like everything else about the house, was bearing in upon a tea-tray—Captain Waters bowed himself out of the presence; and the ladies were left alone. Alone, to digest the news as best they might: to affect to doubt: to trust Captain Waters was not deceived: and to form immediate plans, each one of them in her heart, for letting the Lovells know that it was never her, oh, never! who said any of the unkind things that certainly *had* been said in Morteville about dear little Archie.

Can worse be recorded of these women? When all they knew of Archie Lovell was that she was fresh, fair, and young, they reviled her. When they were assured of her social superiority to

themselves ("her father an honourable," thought Gussy, "her grandfather a lord! oh, if I can only get her to write to me!") they were ready in an instant to grovel at her feet. Can human meanness go further?

As Waters was walking back to his hotel, he thought with a feeling of positive sickness over that last hour's work he had gone through. In men like him—men from whose hearts the very last traditions of honour have fled—the hereditary finer instincts of gentlemen do occasionally linger still. Of all this Morteville vampire brood, Waters was, in fact, perhaps the most morally worthless; ten minutes ago had declared himself ready to take his oath to a falsehood; was organizing a scheme to make the secret of a child of seventeen "a property;" had defended her to-night only to get the whole speculation more securely into his own hands —not actually with any idea of immediate gain, but as a lien, a possible hold, upon her through every year of her future life. And still to himself he seemed a prince among them all. He might, for money, have to do queer things, to put up with queer acquaintance now and then; but to the lowest dregs of all, to the standard of the O'Rourke and Maloney, he felt that he could never sink. He might be a scoundrel; a good many well-born men have been that; one of a *canaille* like this, never!

Noblesse oblige. As a lad—with keen vividness old memories throng upon him as he walks slowly home to his hotel now: as a lad—one false step about money had cast him down, certainly, from the level of his peers. But no false step, no number of false steps, can ever thoroughly drain out the blue blood from a man's veins. Was he, in truth, so very dishonourable, then, he wonders? He doesn't know now; he knows only that he was very foolish, and that he got found out; and was banished from his father's house, and from his club, and from society generally. Banished from every respectable employment that he was fitted for, and, as he was too well-born and nurtured to work, forced in some measure to take up a profession that he was fitted for, but which was not respectable. The profession of living about in places like Homburg, Florence, Morteville-sur-mer, and making money out of every man, woman, or child he comes across.

Standing in the pure summer night—he feels he wants a great

deal of fresh air to renew the oxygen that Miss Marks' rooms have exhausted from his delicate lungs—Waters looks back upon the bygone years and thinks sorrowfully (a man is never so callous but that, at times, he can be tender over himself) upon the hard lines on which his life has fallen! the ill-luck that now, in his middle age, makes him a waif among such people as these in Morteville, instead of a country gentleman, like his elder brother; or a guardsman, like his younger one, the fool Dolly; or a man deep in red tape, like his cousin—whose sums he used to do at school; or a foreign diplomatist, high in honour and repute, like the other cousin—who used to steal his marbles when he was asleep. He was a cleverer and a better boy than any of them, he remembers; and they are—where they are! and he is here—a card-sharper, a lonely wretch whose solace is in brandy and tobacco, and whose associates are such people as these he has just left. And everything's a fluke! falling to work resignedly at cigarette-making; and it's a great thing for a man to feel, however unfortunate he is, that he is a gentleman by birth; that there are depths of mean and paltry degradation to which he can never sink!

And then he chalks out with greater precision to himself the exact words in which he shall conduct his interview to-morrow with Miss Lovell.

CHAPTER XXIII.

LE RENARD PRÊCHE AUX POULES!

He kept to his appointment at eleven, punctually; and found Archie already waiting for him on the plateau. The plateau, as every one knows, is the name given to the portion of the sea-walk immediately in front of the Morteville établissement; and as eleven o'clock is here, as in other French watering-places, the hour when the promenades and beach are most crowded, the meeting of Captain Waters and Miss Lovell was not likely, even among the English residents of the place, to attract observation. As for the

French, never much prone to scandal, they were at the present time engaged to a man. One section dancing about in the sea in the fantastic serge suits that a paternal imperial government imposes upon its children; another ranged on tiers of chairs upon the beach, watching them, with the intense interest an English mind can never thoroughly understand; a third, still by the aid of opera-glasses well within view of their friends in the sea, drinking *consommés*, smoking, reading the papers, and playing dominoes beneath the canvas awning outside the établissement.

Waters came up, his hat in his hand, to Archie, who was walking slowly up and down the plateau in one of the least crowded parts, evidently and without concealment waiting for him. She was paler than usual, and her hair, plainly braided back in the new fashion she had adopted, gave an aged and worn look to her face that Waters was not slow to notice.

"What a different scene all this is to the kind of thing one meets with in our English watering-places," he remarked, as a matter of course turning round and walking by her side; "I am not quite sure after all, though, that the advantage is on our side."

"I don't know," said Archie, coldly; "I have never been in England,—I mean never at an English watering-place."

"Then you have been spared witnessing as much human dullness as can be collected together at one time and in one place," Captain Waters answered, without noticing her abrupt, almost sullen manner. "We go to the sea expressly to bore ourselves, the French to escape from being bored; and I must say I think they are right, although I can't join in the raptures Frenchmen go into about some of their seaside fashions,—the marine costume of the Parisiennes, for example,—with regard to beauty. Do you read French novels, Miss Lovell?"

"I do not."

"A very good thing for you"—the shorter her answers the pleasanter grew the tone of Waters' voice—"a very good thing indeed. English people in general taboo French novels, because they are supposed to be wrong, but the fact is they are only horribly stupid, as stupid very nearly as English ones. However — what was I going to say?—oh, the other day I read in a French novel, and a very excellent one, a description of how a lovely

l'arisienne looks in her black serge dress in the water. 'Une divinité des eaux!'" Waters speaks French like a Frenchman. "'Vous auriez dit une statue de marbre noir à tête blanche. Depuis la pointe de ses jolis pieds jusqu' à ses grands cheveux elle defiait la critique la plus malveillante. Il n'y avait qu' à tombre a genoux devant cet admirable corps!' Now, Miss Lovell, without being the most spiteful critic in the world, I must confess that French women in the water look to me very much more like half-drowned brown rats than like marble statues or divinities. You agree with me?"

She made him no answer whatever; only walked along by his side, her head turned away from him, without the ghost of a smile or of response from her lips; and Waters began to see that whatever he wanted to say he must say without preamble, without assistance of any kind from his companion. "It is the same in everything," he remarked presently; "five hundred people in France sit on the burning sand to watch five hundred other people, ridiculously dressed, but whom they think marble divinities, jump up and down in the water, and the English call the whole scene by very hard names indeed. We, on the other hand, do many things, or rather our young ladies do, which French convention looks upon with absolute horror. You don't mind a cigarette?—thanks." And he made and lit one, while Miss Lovell still walked on silent, and with averted scornful face, by his side.

And then Captain Waters spoke out. "I am very glad, Miss Lovell, that I happened to be on the pier when the steamer arrived from England yesterday morning—glad for every reason. Do you know—but I need not ask; how should you?—that a most absurd, a most malicious story is being circulated in Morteville at the present moment—"

"About—about me?" she interrupted, with quivering lips, and still keeping her face turned aside from him.

"Well, yes; I am sorry to say, about you. I don't know that I should say it is being circulated at this present moment, for I have done my best to stop it; but up to a very late hour yesterday it was the talk of all the English here that—forgive me even for

repeating it—that you had gone away to London in the same steamer with Durant."

Miss Lovell acted no surprise; made no attempt at denial. "Go on, if you please," she said, abruptly. "This is not all, I suppose. Tell me everything you have got to say."

"Well, Miss Lovell, judging from a word that fell from your father's lips when I was speaking to him yesterday, I felt sure that —that this Morteville story ought to be looked upon as an invention. Mr Lovell hinted, I think, that you were at home alone yesterday, and (as it is physically impossible for any person to be in two places at once) I have taken upon myself to contradict the story as a pure and malignant invention."

"And they believed you?" she cried quickly; and looking round at his face for the first time. "Captain Waters, I hope you will be good enough to tell me plainly. Have you made these people believe that what was stated was—false?" But her voice shook with the effort it cost her to bring out these words.

"Yes," he answered, with slow intentional deliberation that tortured her to the utmost. "I believe I may say now that the story is crushed—trodden under foot. It was no easy matter to do, I can assure you," he added. "There were several people besides myself on the Calais pier, and it became simply and literally a matter of hard swearing as to whether Mr Durant's companion was or was not yourself."

"And you swore it was not me?"

"I did. I declared also that I saw you on the pier this morning before the arrival of the first steamer from England."

As Waters said this, Miss Lovell, the daughter of the Rector of Hatton, drew a long breath of relief. Archie Wilson, the unfearing, uncompromising little Bohemian of old days, felt that never in all her seventeen years of life had she had such cause to blush for herself before. A degradation for which she knew no name, a shame from which her child's heart shrank, even while reason bid her play her part out, dyed her face scarlet as she walked by Captain Waters' side, and heard him recount the falsehoods that he had told to save her.

"I am much obliged to you;" after a pause she said this, and

in a stiff, measured tone, as if she was repeating something that she had painfully learnt by rote, and felt herself forced to say: "I don't know why you took my part at all. I don't ask why; but I thank you for papa and myself."

"And you will feel assured of my silence, Miss Lovell? You will feel assured that anything that I may accidentally happen to have witnessed will be a secret that I shall keep sacred while I live?"

"You are very good," was all poor Archie's answer, "and I am much obliged to you." For indeed, she could see no reason either why he had befriended her now, or why her secret, or anything belonging to her, should be a sacred possession to Captain Waters for the future.

"And if, Miss Lovell, at any future time we meet again, you will let me regard myself in some measure as your friend?" The girl only looked a very faint assent. "I am going to leave Morteville, probably within the next twenty-four hours," he went on, talking in a quick, restless way, as he always did when he was forced to speak of his own affairs; "and perhaps—indeed I think it most likely—my business will detain me for the summer in England. Well, Miss Lovell, you must know that I am—I don't hesitate in saying it—a man with whom life has gone somewhat hard, and at times (horribly frequently such times succeed each other) I don't know where to put my hand on a shilling. It is so at this minute, I swear to you; and—"

She turned round: she looked at him so full, that Captain Waters' eyes shifted, in spite of all his assurance, from her gaze. "Do you mean, sir"—very distinct and clear her question fell upon his ear—"that you want me to *pay* you? that this wretched secret of mine has a price?"

He smiled, and put up his eye-glass at a group of Parisian divinités des eaux, who happened to pass before them at this moment. "Well, no, Miss Lovell, I must confess that no such idea crossed my mind. No such idea, at all events, as that which your very melodramatic and picturesque language has placed before me! The facts, as we have come to such charmingly plain speaking, are briefly these. A young lady, granddaughter of a peer, daughter of a rector, everything of the highest respectability,

leaves her home in the company of a stranger, and sixteen or eighteen hours later returns—her father and mother, who happen to be away from home, continuing ignorant of the escapade she has indulged in during their absence. Well, this escapade is—we won't use harsh words—a strong measure for a young lady to take, and this one of whom I speak has quite sense enough to keep her own counsel. Unfortunately the secret is not altogether hers. A third person, towards whom the heroine of the story feels rather unreasonably indignant, happens to see the two young people when they are already on their journey to London; also, as luck will have it, watches the young lady when next day she returns, *alone* to France, and—"

"And asks a price for keeping what he saw a secret!" interrupted Archie, undauntedly. "I quite understand you, sir, and all I have to say to you is—you must do your worst! Go, if you choose, and swear to the people here that what you swore to yesterday was false! I would do anything to screen papa, but it's no use;" the tears rising in her eyes as she made the confession. "I have not a ten-franc piece in the world that I can call my own!"

Her mixture of courage and childishness so overcame Captain Waters' sense of humour that, as nearly as he could ever be said to laugh, he laughed. "I am not quite so poor as you think me, Miss Lovell. You needn't tell me you have no sous in your pocket exactly in the tone you would use to a too-persistent beggar in the street! When I asked you to meet me here to-day, I wished simply to put you on your guard with respect to Miss Marks and some other of the Morteville gossips. When I defended you last night I did what I—or any man," cried Waters, chivalrously, "must feel compelled by instinct to do when one young, pretty, and helpless woman is attacked by half a dozen others, who are neither young nor pretty, nor helpless for the matter of that. You have no particular cause, I think, to be angry with me. I really could not help recognizing you with Durant on board the Lord of the Isles at Calais—now, could I?"

She answered nothing; but stood still waiting for him to finish, and looking at him with flushed face, and with tears still standing in the beautifully-indignant eyes.

"When I spoke of ever meeting you again I thought it right

and honourable to explain to you my position—my want of position would be nearer the mark! Pride made me do so, Miss Lovell. When I thought of accepting your father's kind invitation pride made me explain to you the sort of visitor you would have in me, and then, you know, you interrupted me with a little burst of melodrama about payment and five-franc pieces. A somewhat cruel taunt perhaps to a poor threadbare fellow like me!" Waters looks sentimentally at his coat-sleeve, which is not in the least threadbare; "but you are too young to know the bitterness of your own words. Miss Lovell," and he took his hat off with mock deference to the ground, "good-bye, and set your mind at rest. I am not at all likely to turn traitor: only, when we meet next in the pleasant retirement of Staffordshire, speak to me with a little more kindness—shall I say gratitude?—than you have done this morning!" And he turned from her, and with his accustomed air of dandy indifference, strolled away in an opposite direction across the sands.

Her secret, so far, was safe, then. And yet, with a sinking heart, Archie felt that it had been better every other tongue in Morteville had spoken of her at once than that Captain Waters should track her out in her new English life; that Captain Waters, alone, should have it in his power to betray her!

CHAPTER XXIV.

FOUND DROWNED.

At about four o'clock on the day succeeding his dinner-party Mr Dennison left his chambers in the Temple and walked forth, with quiet composed demeanour, along the Strand in the direction of the west. He was admirably got up, as usual: frock-coat, well-fitting boots, lavender gloves stitched with black, walking-stick-umbrella: his tie, his linen, his whiskers, all irreproachable. Poor Maggie would want to see him, he said—nay, he thought this, to himself: after the cold parting at his chambers the night before,

it was only right that he should go and hold out the olive-branch of peace. He would take her away for one of those country dinners she so loved to Richmond: there would be just time to get off by the five o'clock train if he hurried her in her dressing: and if there was half an hour to spare he would take her round to Regent Street and give her a new bonnet to go in. It *was* hard to a woman's heart, doubtless, to have to wear an old velvet hat in August, poor girl! A French bonnet and a new dress would be the best means of setting everything right between them! And still Mr Dennison's eyes glanced quickly, nervously, at the placards of every news-shop he passed: his ear greedily drank in every word of dislocated, mispronounced intelligence that the hoarse voices of the news-boys, now issuing forth from the different offices with the evening papers, were shouting around him as he walked along.

When he had got within about thirty or forty yards from the opening to Cecil Street he was forced to stop; so dense a crowd had gathered round a red-and-orange placard placed outside an office door close upon his right.

"Earliest intelligence—Clerk suspected of embezzlement—Horrid case of poisoning in Leeds—Found drowned," yelped out a boy in accents that might have been Chaldee or Sanscrit; and running each ghastly announcement into the other, so as to render them wholly unintelligible to any save the preternaturally sharpened sense of one of his hearers. "Clerk suspected of embezzlement—Poisoning in Leeds—Found drowned."

The cold dew started upon Robert Dennison's forehead; another voice besides the news-boy's shrill treble made itself heard to him amidst all the uproar of the London streets. "Found drowned." Why, what nervous fancies were these he had upon him? What interest had he in these vulgar horrors of the penny papers? He wanted quiet and rest; the rest he would get in the green Richmond shades with Maggie. Cecil Street was here close at hand; he would call for her at once, take her to the milliner's, poor child! and be happy, looking at her pleasure, as in the old days of their love—

And he laid his hand heavily on the news-boy's shoulder; took and paid for a paper, and walked on with it folded in his hand—keeping his eyes steadily away from the flaming placard, yet see-

ing, with weird clairvoyance, two words written there, larger, more blood-coloured than the rest!—in the direction of his wife's lodgings.

Nearly opposite to Cecil Street he came to a small chop-house or coffee-room; not the sort of place Mr Dennison would generally have condescended to enter; however, when he had half passed the window, he suddenly said to himself that he would never be able to keep up in this stifling heat unless he got some iced soda-water, water, fluid of any kind to allay his thirst, and after hesitating irresolutely for a minute, he turned back, and stepped inside the door.

"Iced soda-and-brandy? Yes, sir. Will you take a table, sir?" said the mistress of the establishment, obsequiously, and looking instantly, as all women of her class did look, upon Dennison as a tremendous aristocrat. So Mr Dennison took a table, one of the three little rounds of marble the room possessed, and turning his face in such a position that no one in the room could witness its expression, opened out his paper and searched it over for the day's news.

"Found drowned. At about ten o'clock last night two men occupied in a vessel just below London Bridge, heard a sound like the cry of a woman in distress, and immediately afterwards the splash of some heavy body struck the water a few yards, as it seemed, from where the barge was moored. They raised an immediate alarm, and the river police with drags were on the spot at once; but for a long time their search was fruitless. At three o'clock this morning, however, the body of a girl was found, drifted in among some shipping, three or four hundred yards down the river, and bearing evident signs of having been dead some hours. The unfortunate deceased was respectably dressed, and wore a plain gold or marriage ring tied by a piece of ribbon round her throat. The police are already actively engaged in investigating this mysterious tragedy; and from the fact of a handkerchief that deceased had on her person being marked with a monogram, we shall, no doubt, before long, be enabled to present our readers with further and important details."

For a moment Robert Dennison was stunned: felt neither remorse, nor grief, nor pain, nor was sensible of fear; only stared vacantly at the pattern of the gaudy paper on the opposite wall—

a filigree trellis-work, with tier above tier of absurd Swiss shepherdesses looking out from between arsenic green leaves. (Will he ever forget that trellis-work, those shepherdesses? In every illness, in every lonely sleepless night, will they not pursue him, the phantom background to all terrible nightmares, while he lives?) What he saw next was, that they had brought him his soda-and-brandy: and with a physical effort, so great as to cause him actual pain, he put out his hand and raised the glass to his lips. Something prevented him from swallowing a drop. The brandy must be bad, he thought. He never could swallow bad brandy. He would go on at once to Maggie, take her away to the country, and And then, abruptly, with sharp, with awful distinctness, all the meaning, all the danger of his position took palpable shape before his mind. A handkerchief marked with a monogram. The police actively engaged already. What if they tracked out Maggie's lodgings—for he felt as if heaven's voice had spoken that it was she—among her things were notes of his; photographs of his; her marriage lines: everything. What if they found how last night she had been to him, to her husband, for shelter, and how he had turned her out—(his own servant, some chance listener on the stairs, might be brought to witness this against him)—turned her out, in her forlorn despair, to die upon the London streets!

He was a lawyer by nature as well as by profession; and every detail of the situation arranged itself with mechanical clearness, without an effort of volition, almost, before his intelligence. Robert Dennison, this man who had thrust his wife brutally from her rightful place, and who stood in direct extremity of exposure and downfall, seemed, in these first minutes, scarcely more intimately connected with himself than any client would have done whose case had happened to be placed in his hands, and whose sufferings or whose guilt concerned him only in as far as they heightened or lessened the chances of discovery. "Margaret Dennison," said his brain, while his heart kept cold and still, "left her lodgings yesterday evening; went to her husband and was repulsed by him; and to-day is dead. Everything that can mutely identify Robert Dennison as her husband is to be found among the things that she left behind her at her lodgings; and

these, unless active measures be taken at once, will be, in all human probability, at the end of a few more hours in the hands of the police—the placards with which the town must soon be covered scarcely failing to arrest the attention of the master or mistress, or servants, of the lodging-house."

Unless active measures be taken at once. What measures? A remark that his wife had made to him last night came back, word for word, before his memory, as if in answer. "I've paid off the lodgings and left them. You may send for my things to-morrow, if you like." This simply was what he had to do. He got up, put the paper in his pocket, paid for the untasted soda-and-brandy, then went out and walked back along the Strand, till he came to a stationer's shop. This he entered, bought a sheet of note-paper and envelope; and leaning on the counter to write, addressed a few lines to the landlady of the house in Cecil Street, begging that Miss Neville's luggage might be sent to her by the bearer. One of Dennison's accomplishments from the time he was a boy had been a trick of imitating admirably the handwriting of any person he chose; and this note was written in the precise half-flourish, half-scrawl of poor Maggie. He signed it "Lucy Neville," the name by which she had passed, sealed it, paid for the paper and envelope—carefully counting the change out of sixpence; then walked on, Cityward still, and with no more hurried step, no more sign of perturbation on his face, than usual. Before the archway of a coach or parcel office, close by the Olympic Theatre, he stopped, looked at his watch, and stepping inside the archway, inquired from a group of three or four men who were standing there if he could get a porter to fetch some luggage for him from Cecil Street? One of the men, a licensed porter, volunteered for the job on the spot; and twenty minutes later, Robert Dennison, who disappeared in the interval—oh, the cycle, the eternity of those twenty minutes!—saw the well-known new portmanteau and bonnet-box that had been the companions of his wedding-tour, driven up before the office door on the roof of a cab.

Maggie had not returned to her lodgings, then: for, up to the present moment, this had been a moral, not an actual certainty with him! "You haven't been long, my man," he said, addressing the porter, "They had the things all ready for you, I suppose."

"Well, yes," the porter answered, "the boxes were standing ready in the hall, and for the matter of that, the landlady wasn't over civil in saying they ought to have been taken before noon, when the week was up. And here are the lady's keys, sir," he added, taking something wrapped in a very dirty bit of paper, and giving them to Dennison. "The lady left them on the chimney, and I was to say from Mary, which she ars't me—after the landlady were gone—that she'd never let 'em out of her own pocket, and the lady needn't fear but that her things was safe."

"All right," said Dennison, carelessly, but with a strange sense of the way in which chance now, as throughout his life, seemed to be with him. "All right. What do you want for the job? Two shillings—what, for less than half an hour's work? no."

He paid the porter the exact sum that was due to him—nothing more likely, he thought, to awaken suspicion than ever paying any man a farthing more than his due—and jumping into the cab, ordered the driver to go to the Shoreditch Station. When he had got some way along Fleet Street, however, something seemed to make him change his mind; and getting out, he paid and dismissed the cab, deliberately waited with his luggage for three or four minutes just by the open space or foot-passage which leads up to Saint Bride's Church, then hailed another cab and drove back quietly to his own chambers in the Temple. Had his servant been at home, a different and a more involved plan might, perhaps, have been forced upon him. But the boy, by his permission, had gone out for the remainder of the day; and judging with calm dispassionate coolness—the lack of which drives the majority of guilty men into acts of rash self-betrayal—Dennison decided that the safest place in England for him to go to now would be his own chambers. A better or a weaker man, circumstanced as he was, would have striven, perhaps, to make away with every evidence of his connection with Maggie: all that Dennison felt it imperatively necessary for him to destroy were the proofs of his marriage. He was bold through temperament and through education alike: and on principle ever chose the most open game that could be played. By taking away these things of hers out of London, by attempting to destroy them with every device that the "crooked wisdom" of cunning could suggest, there had been, he knew, a thousand times

more risk than in driving with them straight to his own rooms, and, if need be, conducting the first detective officer who should come to question him to the closet where they lay.

The one-armed old pensioner who generally acted as Mr Dennison's porter, happened at the moment of his arrival to have gone round to his home in the nearest court to tea; so the cabman, helped by Robert himself, carried up the luggage, without being met by any one, to the second floor; where Mr Dennison paid and discharged him. The placard "gone out of town" which the boy had hung outside the door of the chambers he took down, as soon as he had unlocked the door and carried the luggage inside. A weaker man would, probably, again have erred on the side of prudence by leaving the placard where he found it; but Dennison, rapidly summing up every possibility of suspicion that could arise against him, had decided in an instant upon removing it. He possessed the true inborn genius of cunning; not mere skin-deep aptness for cunning when occasion arises; and had the most thorough mistrust at all times as to the evidence of his own senses. He saw no one, certainly, as he came up the stairs, but how should he say that no one saw him? If any human eye had watched him in, and then saw the placard "not at home" still on his door, this circumstance alone might give birth to inquiry. In the hundreds of criminal cases that he had studied—not that he, Robert Dennison, was a criminal, this struck him only as a general fact—he had remarked how invariably men themselves help on the discovery of the real truth by the very means they employ to prevent suspicion. To have allowed the legal evidence of his marriage to remain in Cecil Street would have been the hardiness of a fool. To act, now that he held them in possession, as near as possible with the quiet straightforwardness of an innocent man, was what his temperament and his reason alike bade him do.

The venetians of his windows were all pulled down tight; shutting out whatever air stirred on the river or in the Temple Gardens, but letting in that strange baked atmosphere, void of oxygen, and charged with all nameless evil compounds, peculiar probably to London more than to any other city in the world during July and August. Dennison felt as though the closeness would stifle him; and crossing over to the window, hastily pulled

up one of the blinds above his head. The cords gave a creaking sound as he drew them; and a group of two or three little children at play in the gardens beneath with their nurse, a tall dark girl, about the growth and age of Maggie, looked up at him, nurse and all, and laughed.

Bold as he was, and crafty, and alert against surprise, some weaker element there was, some lingering human association yet, in Robert Dennison's heart; and it stirred—ay, for an instant palsied every fibre of his stout frame at this moment.

Palsied by the sound of children's unconscious voices! by a girl's face that happened to have something the complexion or the smile of Maggie's! Why, what folly, what contemptible cowardice was this that was falling upon him?

He smiled to himself to think what tricks a man's nerves, the miserable material tramways of his intelligence! can in some disordered conditions of the system or the weather play upon him. But he let down the blind again with singular haste notwithstanding. The sun shone in that way, he remembered; the room after all must be cooler if he kept it darkened.

. . . And then he carried the boxes into his bedroom, took the keys out from his pocket, and kneeling down upon the floor, set himself with a supreme effort of will, and with hands as trembling and as cold as hers had been when she left him last, to the accomplishment of his task.

CHAPTER XXV.

DEAD ROSE LEAVES!

Six or eight French railway labels were on the boxes still; reminding Dennison, with the pathos these commonplace things can take at times, of every halting-place in his wedding tour. Calais, Amiens, Paris, Rouen, Dieppe—all the span of Maggie's short-lived dream of Elysian happiness! These, not without a sharp contraction of the heart, he tore off sufficiently to render them illegible, before attempting to open the boxes.

"If—if all this turns out nothing," he thought, as with trembling, awkward hands, he fitted one key after another into the lock of the portmanteau, and striving to address the other honourable, God-fearing Robert Dennison, not his very inmost self, as I suppose most of us do strive to the last, to blind something out of, and yet within, our own souls. "If Maggie is all right, and has only been getting up a little theatre to frighten me, I shan't have done much harm by destroying a love-letter or two, and a dozen photographs, and we shall laugh some day over the thought of my imaginary widowhood together—poor Maggie!"

But though he could address his honourable, God-fearing friend with such glib innocence, and although the portmanteau lay open now beneath his hand, Robert Dennison recoiled, as one would do at the touch of death, from handling anything it contained. Afraid? Of course not. What was there for him to fear? He was out of sorts to-day—upset, naturally, at the bare possibility of this thing he dreaded; and, rising abruptly to his feet, he walked back to his sitting-room, and poured out and drank a glass of water from a carafe that stood upon the sideboard.

The heat was really stifling, and he had not been in bed since yesterday. What wonder if his throat felt fever-parched? What wonder if he shrank from making even the slightest bodily exertion? He took off his coat, and loosened his necktie—anything to keep his hands another minute from the contact of those things of hers!—Wondered if a cigar would do him good; lit one, put it to his lips, laid it down on the mantelpiece a minute after; took a turn or two up and down his room; then, with a convulsive sort of resolution, went back to his work, and, without giving himself another moment to think, drew out a whole armful of the contents of the portmanteau, and tossed them down beside him on the floor.

All the little possessions she had had in the world were there. Her linen, fine and white, but without lace or embroidery; her best black silk, carefully folded the wrong side out; her velvet jacket, pinned up (for next winter) in paper; her prayer-book; her work-case; a song or two, "Robert" among them, that Dennison had bought for her at the time when he thought drilling her unapt fingers into striking five or six notes of accompaniment the most

blissful employment in existence; the play-bills of the French theatres, and of one or two London ones, to which he had taken her; her marriage lines; a packet of his love-letters; her few trinkets; her watch and chain. All she had possessed; all the record of that short "lady's" life she had known since she exchanged Heathcotes and work, and peace of mind, for Mr Dennison's love. The lodging-house servant had been faithful; everything was right; and Dennison held all the evidence most precious for him to possess, here, alone, between his own hands.

He collected every letter, every piece of paper containing a name, every photograph—there were about a dozen of himself, and one or two of her; then, having carefully looked over the linen, and found no letters or mark of any kind upon it, put back everything, with as neat a touch as he could command, into its place. It was horribly hard work. The air must be growing hotter and hotter, or his last night's vigil have made him really ill, for great cold drops—a strange effect for sultry weather to have—stood thick upon his forehead; the weight of these light woman's things—yes, even to the little linen cuffs and collars, the poor bit of embroidery, with the needle and thread still as she had left it—seemed to oppress his arms with an intolerable leaden weariness. But still, with unflagging strength of will, he kept himself to his work: never stopping until the last thing had been replaced, the newspaper folded, as her neat hands had folded it, over the top. The worst was over now, he thought. He had only to take a glance, for precaution, through the other box; only carefully to burn the photographs and letters one by one in his grate; and with somewhat restored nerve he was just preparing himself to look over the different papers that he held in his hand, when a long loud ring came suddenly at his chambers door.

For an instant his face turned to ashes; for an instant the common animal instincts of guilt—flight, concealment—did cross his brain. An instant only. Then Robert Dennison rallied thoroughly; the stout spirit, that had forsaken him when he was alone with a few senseless bits of cambric and silk, returning the moment that any positive danger—a man, a detective for aught he knew, was to be confronted. Anything, he reasoned promptly—the boxes, the torn labels still upon the floor, the letters in his posses-

sion—would be better than the risk of incurring suspicion by keeping his visitor waiting. And pushing the papers away, out of sight but not locked up—if search *were* made what mattered lock and key?—he took up his coat across his arm, passed his handkerchief over his face, then whistling out of tune—Robert Dennison never, under any circumstances, sang or whistled true—walked on calmly to the outer door and opened it.

No lynx-eyed detective officer stood there, but a young brother Templar, not exactly a friend of Dennison's, but a man whose money he was in the habit of taking at cards, and who consequently held himself entitled to come and bore him whenever and for whatever length of time he chose. His name matters not: he has no further connection with this history: enough that, although he was young, he was a bore of the first magnitude (and, on occasion, a young man may bore you quite as intensely as an old one); a bore who talked on and on of things without the remotest human interest, careless whether he received an answer or no; a bore who, when he had talked himself hoarse, smoked, boring you still by the mere expression of his face, and when he had smoked himself dry, drank; and bored you more than ever by the interminable way in which he made his liquor hold out! Dennison went through torture inexpressible during the hour and a half that this man sat with him in his chambers. Negative torture, perhaps, but none the less poignant still. Here was invaluable time—time on the employment of which his whole future life might hang; and he had to sit quietly and listen to what Judge This said in such a Court, on such a case; and what Serjeant That, very mistakenly, replied; and what he, the bore, would have said had he been in either or both of their places! When seven o'clock came he felt that he could bear it no longer. After being tolerated for an hour and a half, could even a bore complain of being turned out, or draw suspicious conclusions from your wishing to be left alone? So, looking at his watch, he got up hurriedly; exclaimed, as though he had just remembered it, that he had an engagement for dinner, and managed to get his visitor to the threshold, where the unconscious bore stayed talking for ten minutes longer at least, one arm well within the door-way, as experience doubtless had taught him to do when talking to

wearied and desperate men on the door-step of their own houses. And then Robert Dennison was alone again.

Seven o'clock. Three hours only since he first heard the newsboys calling along the Strand! He seemed to have lived a dozen common days in these three hours! Blankly staring at the trellis-work and shepherdesses on the coffee-room wall; walking alone with his guilty heart, in the sight of men and in the sunshine, along the streets; waiting for the porter's return from Cecil Street; getting back to his chambers; the work that he had done there; the torture of sitting powerless with his visitor, listening for every sound upon the stairs, every heavy footstep that it seemed to him *must* stop, pause stealthily, and then be followed by a ring at his door. . . . Why, each of these seemed a distinct ghastly epoch; an epoch almost as remote from the present moment as were the happy innocent days when he was a boy at school. And six, seven hours remained still before the day would be done. God, were they to pass as these had passed? Was this how men live when they are in dread of discovery? Was there more meaning, after all, in that old-fashioned word "remorse" than any which he had before assigned to it in his philosophy?

He went back; he finished his task. Looked through the other box; handled more cambric and ribbons and bits of lace, round all of which the faint scent of the rose-leaves and lavender the country girl had brought with her from Heathcotes—well he remembered it—seemed clinging yet; burnt, one by one, his letters . . . how she had kept every line, every word that ever came from his hand! his photographs and hers; her marriage lines; the torn railway labels; everything. Then he stood free. The boxes he stowed out of sight, yet not with any ostentatious secrecy, in a closet among his own; the ashes from the papers he collected to the last fragment out of the grate, and shook away through the window. He stood free. The wife, whose existence had been his stumbling-block, gone; every paper that could prove him to have been her husband destroyed. Free! In a position at length to fulfil all his ambition, ay, to marry his cousin Lucia, perhaps, if he chose. Free! And still with that livid sweat upon his forehead, that leaden weight about his limbs. Still listening for every footstep that approached his door; starting irritably at every child's voice

that pealed up, sweet and merry, from the Temple Gardens without!

He would be better abroad, he thought, when another miserable half-hour had passed by: better with men's eyes upon him; better anywhere than here. It was being shut up in the same room with these things of his poor Maggie's that overcame him; and no wonder! addressing the other honest, virtuous Robert Dennison again. She was a good girl, one who loved him well! It might be to his worldly advantage that she should be gone; but he would never find a woman love him as she had done—never! and it was horrible to have to bear up and keep an iron face when in his heart he was yearning for freedom to weep over her; yearning to find her out, rescue her from sacrilegious touch or sight, and bestow the last poor amends he could make for all the bitter wrongs he had done her!

Robert Dennison said this: probably he thought it in his very heart. The hardest, the guiltiest man among us all, never, I imagine, stands utterly bare, face to face with his own conscience. And when, an hour later, he found himself sitting in his accustomed dining-place, but physically unable to swallow food, and with a choking sensation at his throat whenever he thought of those poor things of hers that he had touched (the things whose faint rose-leaf scent *would* cling about him still), he felt satisfied, not alone that he was in no way guilty of her death—that, of course, was self-evident—but that he must really have been a great deal fonder of her than he knew, and that her loss, if indeed he had lost her, would be a life-long burthen for him to bear.

After his scarce-tasted dinner came dessert, and with dessert the third edition of one of the evening papers was laid before him.

"The police continue actively engaged upon the mysterious case of drowning from London Bridge." In an instant his eyes lighted on this paragraph: and still—as on the placard in the Strand—the prophecy of his own shame seemed to stand out luridly distinct, as if printed in red ink, from all the other ones. "It is believed now that death took place before the body reached the water, and grave suspicions of foul play are entertained. An inquest will be held to-morrow morning, when it is fully expected that further and most important circumstances will be brought to light; indeed,

we believe we shall not hinder the ends of justice by hinting that a clue to the solution of the tragedy has been already traced. Two facts at least may be stated as certain: first, that a handkerchief, evidently the property of a gentleman, and finely embroidered with three initial letters, was found in the breast of the unfortunate deceased; secondly, that the person of a man with whom she was seen in conversation on the night of her death is known to an officer of the City Police."

And there were five hours more before Robert Dennison could even hope to find forgetfulness in sleep!

CHAPTER XXVI.

BY THE RIVER-SIDE.

THREE O'CLOCK in the afternoon again; the sky a livid copper-colour; the pavements broiling hot; the air quivering, dense, and furnace-like. London at white heat. London at that soft hour of an August day when, far away in the country, lengthening shades begin to cross the yellow fields, and when the robin, reminding one already of autumn evenings, pipes from the hedge-rows, and voices of men and girls at harvest-work ring pleasantly through the leafy lanes.

"Mr Wickham, Lilac Court," exclaimed a sun-burnt country-woman, as she descended from an omnibus in Fleet Street, about fifty yards east of Chancery Lane, and gazing about her with the stunned, bewildered air that men and women more accustomed to a bovine than a human world are apt to wear when they find themselves upon a city pavement. "And however in the world am I to find where Lilac Court is?"

The question, vaguely addressed to the general intelligence of London, having received no answer, she went into a law stationer's close at hand and repeated it. Would any of the gentlemen, with a curtsey, have the goodness to direct her to Lilac Court? Which the omnibus set her down here as her nearest point, but being a

stranger in London on important business, and in search of a gentleman by the name of Wickham—

"First turn to the right, six doors up, second floor," cried an automaton-like little old man, without raising his eyes from an enormous ledger, on which he was occupied. "Bell on the left as you enter. Now then, Charlie, you look alive!" still without raising his eyes, and addressing a furiously hot boy who, with arms full of blue ruled paper, was issuing, in his shirt sleeves, through a hole in the floor; "and as you go up to Atkins's show this party the way to Mr Wickham's office."

An order which the boy at once obeyed; turning round with a noiseless whistle and staring full in the face of the country-woman, who followed him, in a way that discountenanced her extremely. Mr Wickham, whoever he might be, seemed tolerably well known, she thought; and in London, too, where she had always heard no man knew the name of his next-door neighbour; but that was no reason why those that wanted Mr Wickham should be stared at like beasts in a caravan. London manners, as far as she could see, were pretty much of a piece with their milk; and instead of giving the boy twopence for his pains, as her heart prompted her, the good woman strode indignantly past him up the stairs conducting to Mr Wickham's office, never pausing, although her face grew ominously redder, her breath shorter, at every step, until she found herself upon the second floor, to which she had been directed to go.

A brass plate, bearing the name of "Mr Wickham," was on a door straight before her, a little white-handled bell on the left—a bell which when pulled gave, not a hearty human peal, as country bells do, but one muffled stroke, like the ghost of the squire's stable gong, she thought; or the first cracked "dong" of the old village church-bell sounding for a funeral.

In a second, and without any mortal agency that the country-woman could discern, the door opened, and she found herself, too agitated to speak, inside a small, very neat office, and in the presence of a middle-aged gentleman, dressed in a plain suit of dark clothes: a gentleman who was sitting, a letter in his hand, beside the open window which admitted whatever air there was to be had from Lilac Court. He looked round; took one glance at his visit-

or's appearance and demeanour—the country face, the country clothes, the little country curtsey—then gave her a good-humoured nod and a smile that set her at her ease in a moment.

"Good afternoon to you, ma'am. Tolerably hot here in London, isn't it?" And without waiting for her to answer, the gentleman in plain clothes came across the room, gave her a chair, and taking one himself, sat down, as though they had known each other since childhood, and had met for the express purpose of talking over the familiar events of by-gone years together. "You've had a good deal of trouble to find my place out, no doubt?" he went on, seeing that she wanted breath still. "Country folk *have* a trouble in finding their way about at first, until they get a little used like to the town."

The visitor upon this took out her handkerchief; first wiped her forehead, then her eyes, and observed, in a fluttered way, that town for certain was one thing and the country another, and there was a deal of wickedness about everywhere—an apothegm at which her companion shook his head corroboratively—and she was staying with her cousin at Stoke Newington, and if she might be so bold—cutting short her private history with a nervous jerk—was she speaking to Mr Wickham?

"Well, yes—my name certainly is Wickham," answered the gentleman in plain clothes; but with a sort of reluctance, as though good-breeding struggled with truth in thus speaking of himself at all. "And yours, ma'am, I think—"

She replied, all in strong, midland-county accent, and with utter absence of stops, and ever-growing agitation, that her name was Sherborne. Susan Sherborne, wife of Thomas Sherborne, of the parish of Heathcotes, Staffordshire; and holding a dairy-farm, as his father had done before him, of Sir John Durant, of Durant's Court. Mr Wickham had heard of the family at the Court, of course? Mr Wickham's face interpolates that he is familiar with them—and seven months ago come the 10th, a trouble fell on her, and on the family too, for the matter of that, and she had never been herself since. Not to say ill, but a kind of weakness all over and no sleep o' nights—a shake of Mr Wickham's head shows that this kind of nervous affection is well known to him personally—and so for change of air, though air it isn't (in parenthesis), from

air to no air would be nearer the mark—she came up to spend a few days with her cousin, married to a greengrocer at Stoke Newington, and the mother of five as beautiful children as you'd see anywhere. Here she stopped, and put her handkerchief to her eyes again.

"Well, ma'am, nothing happened to any of 'em, I hope?" said Mr Wickham, taking out his watch and looking hard at her. "My time is rather short to-day, and although I'm particularly fond of children—"

"Oh, sir!" cried the woman eagerly, "it isn't the children at all, and I won't keep you five minutes. It was all in the papers yesterday, about the girl that was found drowned, you know, and my cousin's husband, which a better man and a kinder, out of drink, doesn't live, read it out to us after supper, and if you'll believe me, sir, I never timed my eyes all night, thinking from the description it might be our Maggie; and this morning my cousin said to me, 'Susan,' she said, 'you take a 'bus and go off and try whether you can get to see her for yourself or not, for anything,' she said, 'is better than thinking one thing and thinking another and fretting yourself, which is here for health, off your rest and victuals.' And so, sir, by her and her husband's advice, I came, as you see."

"And to me!" exclaimed Mr Wickham, with innocent perturbation. "Why, my dear soul, whatever on the face of the earth made you come to me?"

"Oh, sir! I hope you'll excuse the liberty if I've done wrong, but I went to a police station, somewhere about Dewry Lane, I believe, was the name—"

"Well, there is a police station—there *is* a police station near Dewry Lane, certainly," Mr Wickham admitted; adhering to his visitor's pronunciation with the fine breeding that seemed an instinct in him.

"And the people there were very civil, and I went in and spoke to him as seemed the chief, and told him what I came about and what I wanted, and says he, 'Mr Wickham is the person for you to see in this: Mr Wickham, Lilac Court,' which I knew no more than the babe unborn, and wrote it on an envelope, as I can show you."

And she took out an envelope, on which was written, "Mr Wickham, Lilac Court, Fleet Street," with a hieroglyphic of some kind or other—a monogram, probably, of the Drury Lane establishment—scrawled in the corner.

Mr Wickham took the envelope; looked at it carefully; folded it down with his broad thumb-nail; tore it up with an absent air into small pieces; and finally took out and consulted his watch again. "Half-past three! Well, well, my dear, we must see what can be done for you, and we'll hope—for your sake and the young woman's sake equal—that everything will turn out comfortable. Turn out comfortable," he repeated, rubbing his hands slowly together, "as most things do, you know, when taken in time. Staffordshire's a fine county to live in, isn't it? Clayey? Ah, so I've been told, but fine pasture in your neighbourhood. Yes, yes; *just* so. And you've held your land under Sir John Durant all your life, as you may say. And your husband's father before him. To be sure. Well, now then I'll tell you what I can do for you in this affair. You know who I am, of course? Mr Wickham—yes, that's my name for certain; but I mean, you know who I am, and what my profession is?"

Mrs Sherborne suggested, vaguely, "In the law, she supposed?" Her ideas of the constabulary were exclusively confined to blue coats, white gloves, and helmets; and she would have been less surprised at hearing that her new friend was Lord Chancellor than a policeman.

"In the law! ha, ha!" Mr Wickham laughed pleasantly. "Well, that's not so bad. In the law! and so I am in the law, and I'm going to help you with a little of my legal advice. You've taken a fancy that this young woman who was found in the river is some friend of yours; and although it's rather late in the day—such matters being generally got over quick," adds Mr Wickham, with ghastly meaning, "in this murky sort of thundery weather—I'll do what I can for you to have a look at the poor creature. Only, first—first, you see, ma'am, for form's sake, I must ask you this: Why do you suppose the young woman found drowned in the river and your friend are one and the same?"

Mrs Sherborne hesitated, and glanced nervously about the room, with a haunting recollection still, probably, of the supernatural

way in which the door had opened to her. "I don't want to get any one into trouble, sir"—bringing out her handkerchief again—"and unless I was certain—"

"Just so," interrupted Mr Wickham, reassuringly. "That's it. Unless you were certain, you wouldn't wish to mention names, or do anything to bring other people into trouble. That's quite right, Mrs Sherborne, and I respect you for the sentiment; only, you see, *why* should you imagine that your friend and the young woman found in the river should be one and the same? That's the question we've got to do with now."

"Well, sir, then, as I must speak, it was the description of the person that struck me; and a finer-grown girl, and a handsomer, than Maggie, there was not in the country round, nor a better; and being an orphan, and had lived under my roof since she were twelve, I know just as well as if she were my own—and when first she went away, seven months ago come the 10th, I never would believe, for all one might say and another might say, that she had come to harm, nor never would. Only, you see, sir, and you'll excuse me for saying it, that where there's a gentleman born in a case like this, there's no saying what a girl may be drove to as soon as that gentleman born gets tired of her—married or not married." And Mrs Sherborne sobbed aloud.

Mr Wickham got up, took his hat and stick, and called, without raising his voice, "Nicholson." Whereupon a younger man, dressed also in plain clothes, appeared through a panelled door, which Mrs Sherborne had not noticed, close to the chief's right hand. "I'm going a little way in the City with this good lady, Nicholson. Nothing particular," giving a single look into the other's face, "and nothing that will keep me long. If I am not back at five, and Barton calls, tell him I believe I've news of the vessel he was wanting to hear about. Now, ma'am, I am at your service." And with many gallant apologies for going first, Mr Wickham preceded Mrs Sherborne down the dark and narrow staircase; then out through Lilac Court, and into Fleet Street again.

"No objection to a two-wheel, ma'am?" he asked, putting his nose close to Mrs Sherborne's ear, in order to make himself heard amidst the thunders of the Fleet. "I thought not;" as Mrs Sherborne, in helpless pantomime, expressed that two-wheels and

four-wheels were the same to her. "The ladies all partronize the two-wheels now-a-day;" and, waiting a minute or two first, to select an extra good horse, Mr Wickham hailed a hansom; then after handing Mrs Sherborne into it—a work of some trouble, for she had never been in such a conveyance before, and required minute instructions as to which side she should sit, and what she should do with her basket and her umbrella, an excessively bulky one, apparently holding other articles inside—told the cabman to drive to some address the country-woman could not hear, and jumping in alertly, took his place beside her.

They had a long distance to go; but Mr Wickham made the road seem short by the pleasant way in which he lionized the City to his companion. Up that street, to the left, was the Old Bailey, of which, of course, she had heard tell; and here was Ludgate Hill and Saint Paul's Cathedral; and the Monument, from which, in years gone by, the people used to pitch themselves. And there, away to the right, was London Bridge, and this—when they had passed into the region of narrow lanes, and water-side avenues which lie beside Lower Thames Street and the river—this was the way down to the Tower, where the kings and queens used to be beheaded, and the docks, the pride and glory of Great Britain, before all the nations of the earth.

Not a very pleasant part of the town, Mr Wickham acknowledges—and as he looks into the wholesome rosy face at his side, the contrast between it and the soddened, yellow, miserable faces on the pavement strikes even him—but worth seeing too, in its way. Folks from the country ought to be able to tell their friends they had seen everything, the good and the bad together,—"and you must keep your spirits up, my dear," he adds, "and look about you, and hope that everything will turn out comfortable yet."

They drove along through more labyrinths of lanes and avenues; each so dark on this bright summer day, so fetid, so sunless, that even with the pleasant gentleman who was protecting her by her side, Mrs Sherborne's spirits sank within her at every minute. "Keep a good heart, ma'am," whispered Mr Wickham, "keep a good heart. We're at our journey's end now, and you shall have your mind set at rest and everything put straight in less than a quarter of an hour." And then, opening the lid in the roof, he

bade the driver stop at the first turn to the left, when they got to the river-side.

"You'll have to walk a few steps, Mrs Sherborne," he said, turning cheerily, as soon as they had alighted, to the poor scared woman, from whose honest face every vestige of its natural colour had now flown.

"Just take my arm, and we'll soon know the worst of everything." Saying which, Mr Wickham turned down a narrow passage or foot-road between two ruinous blocks of houses, and after walking twenty or thirty steps, stopped before the door of a small tavern, squalid and black with dirt, like everything else in the neighbourhood, and with a female, apparently a Red Indian, grasping a toasting fork, as she sat upon a particoloured ball, an eel writhing under her feet, and "Britannia" written in yellow and green letters above, for a sign-board.

"Is—is she here, sir?" cried Mrs Sherborne, drawing back on the threshold of the house. "For the Lord's sake, tell me!"

"You come along with me," was Mr Wickham's answer, in a somewhat more authoritative tone than the mild and easy one he had hitherto employed. "You come along with me, ma'am, and keep yourself cool *and* quiet. We may be very interested, as is natural, in our own little business, you know, but that's no reason why we should set other people up to be interested in it too."

He led her through the passage, or rather through the series of crooked passages—down one step, up two, down three again—that intersected the house; speaking a word or two to some person or persons behind the red curtain of the bar as he passed; then out into a small strip of land, that might in those regions be called a garden, at the back—a garden thickly covered with a deposit of oyster, crab, and lobster-shells, but without a trace of flower, tree, or plant of any kind. At the bottom of this garden, and on a dead level with it, lay the Thames; golden now in the slanting summer sun, and with its stately outward-bound ships floating slowly down to the sea. On one side was a nest of dark, broken-down, one-storied houses; on the other a plain stone building, soot-grimed, like everything else in the district, but comparatively decent; whole-paned at least, and with a look "less like being murdered and quick-limed than any of the other places about," as Mrs Sherborne used after-

wards to say, when narrating all this terrible day's experience to her gossips by the comfortable hearth at home.

To a side-door of this building Mr Wickham, passing out through a shattered gate in the ale-house garden, now conducted his companion. His knock was answered in a moment by a policeman in uniform—for the first time giving Mrs Sherborne the comforting assurance that she was really under the protection of the law.

"Mrs Matthews here?" inquired Mr Wickham, curtly.

"Yes, sir," was the answer, given in the same tone, and with no look of recognition passing between the officer and the visitor.

"Send her to me."

They waited a minute or so; Mrs Sherborne beyond the power of asking questions now, but holding on trembling—stout-nerved countrywoman as she was—to Mr Wickham's arm; then Mrs Matthews appeared—a short, stout, hard-featured old woman with a smile destined to haunt Mrs Sherborne's rest while she lived: such a smile as you might imagine a woman would wear who united in herself the offices of searcher and layer-out at a river-side police station; and Mr Wickham, after a whispered word or two in her ear, handed his companion over to her charge.

"You're only just in time," she croaked, after conducting Mrs Sherborne along a dark stone-vaulted passage, and stopping as she selected a key from a bunch at her waist. "In half an hour more she'd 'a been screwed down. Walk in, my dear, don't be afeard! and if I was you—not being accustomed—I'd hold my handkerchief up over my mouth. La, la!" as Mrs Sherborne stood faintly irresolute before obeying her, "it's what we must all come to—all come to?"

And then Mrs Matthews stood placidly thinking of her tea, and consoling herself for being interrupted in it by some periwinkles which she happened to have in her pocket, while the countrywoman went in alone to look upon the face of the dead.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"G. S. D."

Mr Wickham had followed the two women closely, and stood ready to meet Mrs Sherborne when, at the end of a silent two minutes, she tottered back out of the room to which they had conducted her.

A glance, less than a glance, into her face told him all that he sought to know; and in a moment he was at her side, and had drawn her hand fast within his arm again. "You keep yourself quiet, Mrs Sherborne," he whispered, leading her out of ear-shot of the old woman at once. "Don't you say a word—not one! and never fear but that justice will be done to all. I told you things would end comfortable, and so they will. Take my word for it."

And then back the way they had come, too quick to give Mrs Sherborne time to cry or break down, he led her through the oyster-shell beds, and along the narrow up-and-down passages of the public-house till they reached the bar. Here Mr Wickham stopped, and addressed a word or two to a man dressed in a jersey and a fur cap, and of a countenance that bespoke a closer acquaintance with the practices of the ring than with any Christian virtues —the landlord, half waterman, half prize-fighter, wholly blackguard, of the "Britannia."

"Surely, Mr Wickham, surely," he answered, obsequiously. "Sarah Ann," opening a door at the back, or river-side of the house, "come out a little to me, my dear. Here's a gentleman and a lady would like the parlour to have a cup of tea in. This way, ma'am," to Mrs Sherborne; "one step down, if you please. Sarah Ann, wheel the sofa round to the window. As fine a view of the river, though I say it, ma'am, as any in London."

Sarah Ann was a dark-haired, rather pretty child of fourteen, with the unmistakeable look of decent girlhood about her clean summer dress and shining hair and modest face: the look that so mysteriously meets you sometimes, in these places, and on the children of ruffians like this man. She put down her work—very smart wool-work it was, Mrs Sherborne noted, as women do note

the small matters of their world, whatever their own state of mind —with silver paper carefully pinned over it to keep all, save the square inch where she was working, clean; then followed her father out of the room at once, smiling shyly at Mr Wickham, who remarked that she really grew out of knowledge every time she came home from boarding-school, and Mrs Sherborne and her new friend were left alone.

Mr Wickham came across the room, put a chair for himself opposite the rickety horse-hair sofa that the girl had wheeled beside the bay-window, and looked Mrs Sherborne steadily in the face.

"Now, my good lady," said he, "don't you go to flurry yourself unnecessarily. I needn't put any questions, for I see by your face that your friend and this young woman that was found in the river are one and the same, and, as I told you before, you needn't fear but that justice will be done to all. You know, I suppose, Mrs Sherborne, that the inquest on the body was held this morning?"

No, she sobbed, she knew nothing. Only she was sure—and she told Eliza, her cousin at Stoke Newington, the same—that she should be too late, however it was.

"And were not too late," put in Mr Wickham, quietly. "So far from being too late, were just in time, it appears, to establish your friend's identity. Now, Mrs Sherborne, may I further ask if you know what conclusion was arrived at by the jury? You don't, I see; and I'll tell you. No conclusion at all. There was evidence to prove that a heavy body was heard to fall into the water close to the bridge about ten o'clock the night before last, and that this woman was discovered dead—drifted in among some vessels not a couple of hundred yards from where we are sitting"—Mrs Sherborne shuddered—"by an early hour next morning. And there was medical evidence from two surgeons, holding different opinions as to the direct cause of death (as surgeons mostly do on inquests), and that was all. No identification of the body; no clue to the young woman's history in any way. So the jury, directed by the coroner, brought in a verdict 'that deceased was found dead in the waters of the river Thames, but how she came into the said waters there was no evidence to show.' The further management of the

case was put—now don't you be surprised—into my hands. I am Inspector Wickham of the detective force, and the people in the office near Drury Lane knew what they were about when they advised you to come to me for assistance."

Mrs Sherborne started up to her feet; her horror at the sickening sight she had been newly forced to look upon; her grief—and very real grief it was—at the confirmation of her fears—every conflicting emotion of her heart swallowed up in the one overwhelming terror of being in the presence of a detective! This mild, middle-aged gentleman to whom she had talked so freely, and who had lionized the City, and given her his arm so pleasantly, a detective! One of that dread force who with a lightning glance, a seemingly-careless question, can worm out all secrets from the human breast, and deliver men up, whether dukes or beggars, to the dread retribution of justice. A detective! and to realize what Mrs Sherborne felt, it must be recollected that her belief in the infallible, almost omniscient, sharpness of the corps was the purely popular one, derived principally from weekly serials, and holding as much resemblance to the real detective officer of every-day life as the popular Jesuit, the malignant fanatical fiend of Protestant stories, does to the pleasant *poco curante* gentlemen of the Society of Jesus, who sit beside you at a dinner-party.

"If I had only known, sir!" she gasped; "if I had only known," dropping him a curtsey, "I would have spoken very different."

"Not a doubt of it," interrupted Mr Wickham, laying his hand good-humouredly on her arm, and making her sit down again. "If you had known who I was, and what I was about, you'd have been so flustered—I've seen it scores of times among your sex, ma'am—as scarcely to know whether the deceased was your friend or was not. And for that very reason, you see, I kept dark until you had identified her, and took you quiet and comfortable by a side-door to the station, so that you should not be upset by the crowd outside (which there mostly is in these parts) nor anything. And now, Mrs Sherborne, you take a cup of tea"—this as the tawdry slipshod barmaid of the Britannia opened the door and came in with a tea-tray; "you take a cup of tea, and give me one, and then we'll start off homewards. Push the table over by the win-

dow, Polly, and let's see what we've got here. Buttered toast, creases, ham, and a plate of s'rimps." Mr Wickham's tastes were evidently understood in the Britannia. "That will do first-rate, and if we want more hot water we'll ring. Now, Mrs Sherborne, will you pour out the tea? Well, the sofa *is* low; suppose you have a chair over here? I can't say I ever fancy a cup of tea unless it has been poured out by a lady's hand!" adds Mr Wickham, persuasively.

Upon which, Mrs Sherborne having, with some difficulty, taken off her silk gloves, or rather peeled them back after the manner of a snake shedding its skin, untied her bonnet-strings, and spread out her pocket-handkerchief over the lap of her black silk dress, these two singularly-matched companions began their meal together.

Lengthened study of our common nature had taught Mr Wickham, among other important psychological truths, that the conscience of any fasting human creature is much austerer, much more difficult to draw on into confidence, than that of a feasting one. It had also taught him practical wisdom concerning the exact description of food or drink with which the conscience of persons of different ages and sexes may be best propitiated. Thus, with a broken-down swell, he would infallibly, at five o'clock of an afternoon, order sherry and bitters; with the young of either sex, tarts and ginger-beer; with a ragged outcast of the streets, a "quartern"; with a woman of Mrs Sherborne's age and habits, tea, buttered toast, and a relish. And a striking trait of character, a beautiful instance of professional zeal, was to be found in the fact that, whatever conscience had to be thus propitiated, high or low, male or female, Mr Wickham's own digestive powers were ever equal to the task of bearing that conscience company during the process of propitiation.

"Another cup of tea, ma'am? Well, I don't know but what I will take another, if you'll keep me in countenance—and a bit more ham? Come now, you must." The poor woman, who had been traversing London since morning, was really taking her food with relish, but felt, as many people do, that it was a sort of crime, requiring apology, to eat under affliction. "You must keep your strength up, you know. Now, just a little bit—as thin as a wafer.

That's it. And so," after a silence, "this Miss Hall, poor thing, had more than one admirer, eh? Ah! it's generally the case with pretty young women—as I am sure you must have known, ma'am. And mostly above her in rank. All of them, indeed, I think you mentioned?"

"Well, Mr Wickham," answered Mrs Sherborne, confidentially; for, alas for human nature! two plates of ham, two cups of tea, and a few of the detective's artful questions, had made her heart so warm towards him, that the names of Gerald Durant and Miss Lucia and Mr Dennison were already as household words to Mr Wickham. "I don't say all were above her, for there was young Frank Simmons of the mill, as good a lad as ever walked, has been ready to marry her any time this two years; but bless you, these young girls 'll never look at an honest lad of their own condition when once a gentleman have turned their heads with soft words and flatteries! And for certain Mr Gerald is a gentleman that any woman, high or low, might be proud to be chosen by—or Mr Dennison either—and as fine a made man and perfect a gentleman in his ways, as I ever see!"

"And the general opinion, at first, of the country round was that Mr Gerald Durant—thank you, Mrs Sherborne, I don't know but what I will take a crease or two—that Mr Gerald Durant—Gerald Sidney, I think you said?"—and, mentally, Mr Wickham twists the letters G. S. D. into a monogram like one he holds in his possession—"was the companion of the girl's flight?"

"Well, it certainly was said by some," answered Mrs Sherborne, shaking her head with melancholy emphasis; "but for my part I never see why there should be more suspicion of Mr Gerald than of another. Old Sir John took up cruelly hard against him for certain, and for the last six months Mr Gerald has not been near the Court."

"And you yourself believe the girl to have been really married, Mrs Sherborne, you say?"

"I do, Mr Wickham," she answered, decisively. "I got a letter from her, as I told you, a few days after she left, and in that letter she spoke of herself and her happiness in a way that I would take my oath she wasn't a girl to do unless she had been a lawful wedded wife. Why, wasn't she found with a marriage ring tied

on the ribbon round her neck, sir?" cried Mrs Sherborne, eagerly, and with a trembling voice again.

"Y—es," answered Mr Wickham, with deliberation, "that she certainly was, and that taken by itself says nothing—less than nothing, ma'am. If you'd seen as much of this kind of thing as I have, you'd know that people who are going to make away with themselves will act a lie—pay money sometimes to carry that lie out—as deliberate—as deliberate," repeated Mr Wickham, pausing for a simile, "as you or I might do that mean to live. She may have been married and she may not, and this Mr Durant may or may not have been her lover. Time alone will bring it all to light, *and* silence. You understand my meaning, I hope, Mrs Sherborne, when I say, *and* silence?"

Mrs Sherborne opened her eyes very wide, but made no answer.

"I don't mean, of course," explained Mr Wickham, "that you are not to tell your friends at home of the girl's death, and of your having identified her. You say you're going back to Staffordshire to-morrow morning, and it's only natural, and indeed right, that you should speak when you get there of what you have seen. My meaning is, that you should in no way seek to throw blame on this young gentleman, Mr Durant, or even mention anything about the conversation that you have had with me. As far as I can make out, Mr Durant has suffered a great deal in his reputation, as respects a certain party, already, and if, now that that party has met with a sudden death, one was to begin saying one thing and one another, the young gentleman might be brought into very bad trouble indeed. You take my meaning right, Mrs Sherborne! I'm an officer of justice, and the business of my life is to bring the guilty *to* justice, but my maxim always is—shield the innocent, and believe every man innocent until he is proved to be guilty!"

At the enunciation of these beautiful sentiments from the lips of a detective, Mrs Sherborne's honest eyes filled with tears. Mr Wickham need have no fear of her, she sobbed. The family at the Court were the best friends she and her husband had got in the world. She had known Mr Gerald since he was a baby, and had always loved him for his fair face and his winning ways—that she had! and Miss Lucia too; and in spite of all that was past and gone, the best day in her life would be when she should hear

the church-bells ringing for their wedding. Hadn't she mentioned that they were lovers?—in answer to the keen flash of intelligence that passed across Wickham's face—why, it had been a settled thing when Mr Gerald was still in frocks. No one need fear that her tongue would do an injury to him, or any of the family, bless them! and she only hoped Mr Wickham would kindly take no advantage of anything she might have let fall already—making him her country curtsey, and looking imploringly and with tearful eyes in his face.

"Take advantage!" he repeated, almost indignantly. "Why, of course not. I only want to see justice done, to you and your friends too, and don't you fear but if I can bring anything to light in this affair you shall hear from me again. Mrs Sherborne, Heathcotes, Staffordshire, I think you said?" taking out a small pocket-book and a pencil from his pocket. "Near Hatton—ah, yes, near Hatton, Staffordshire. And Heathcotes is on Sir John Durant's estate?—to be sure. Now, Mrs Sherborne, do you happen to know Mr Gerald Durant's address? Somewhere West-end way, you believe, and in the Guards. Well, well, that'll do; I don't suppose I am at all likely to want it. And the other cousin—the gentleman who was also an admirer of Miss Hall's—Mr Robert Dennison, barrister, lives in a place called the Temple, if you remember right? Just so. Now, ma'am, if you have quite done, perhaps you will get ready to start"—Mr Wickham, whose *petits soins* for the fair sex seemed unbounded, pointed out a small dingy looking-glass covered round with pink and green crimped paper above the mantelpiece—"and I'll see you part of the way on your journey home. If we look sharp we can walk up to East-cheap just in time to catch a six o'clock 'bus direct for Stoke Newington."

Which they did. Mr Wickham saw Mrs Sherborne, umbrella and all, safely embedded away among fourteen other Stoke Newington passengers; shook hands with her heartily; hoped they would soon meet again; desired his compliments to Mr S. at home; and kissed the tips of his fingers with gallantry as he stood carelessly watching the departure of the omnibus from the East-cheap office. Then in a second his attitude, his manner, the whole expression of his face, seemed to change.

"Five minutes past six," he thought, taking out his watch. "Time still to look up one or both of these men to-day. The lawyer is the least important; but he comes first upon the road; 'G. S. D.' can be seen to afterwards."

And he hailed a cab, jumped into it, and told the man to drive, and lose no time upon the way, to the Temple.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

WORKING UP A CASE.

Another long day was wearing towards its close with Robert Dennison. The evening papers had afforded him the scanty information that the verdict returned had, by the coroner's direction, been an open one. No details of the inquest itself had as yet been published, and in a fever of doubt and suspense he was standing by his open window, gazing vacantly out upon the gardens and the river, and speculating as to what kind of evidence might at this moment be in the hands of the police, when a discreet ring—neither the loud ring of a friend nor the deprecating ring of a modest dun—came at his chambers' door. A minute later, the card of Inspector Wickham, of the Metropolitan Police—for this time it was the policy of Mr Wickham to affect no mystery—was handed to him.

I have already said that once in the broad region of absolute falsehood, and Mr Dennison felt himself more at home than in the delicate border-land which separates falsehood from truth. It was the same with danger. Once face to face with positive peril, in a position where his own strong will and keen brain were all he had to look to for help, and his nerves felt calmer, his heart freer, his face wore more its natural colour and expression than it had worn yet during the blank dread of the last twenty-four hours. With steady self-possession, overdone in no way, he turned round as Inspector Wickham—closely following his card—was announced; gave him the kind of nod a man would naturally give to a gentle-

man of Mr Wickham's appearance and profession; then stood, his eyes quietly fixed upon his visitor's face, as though waiting to hear what he had got to say.

Mr Wickham gave a little cough, and looked down for a second at the pattern of the carpet. "I beg your pardon, Mr Dennison, for calling upon you so late in the afternoon, but the fact is I have some rather important business on hand; and if you are disengaged—"

Robert Dennison glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece, and answered that he did not dine till seven—it was five-and-twenty minutes past six now—and that he should be happy to give his attention to what Mr Wickham had to say. Then he seated himself beside the table in the centre of the room, signing to his visitor to take a chair opposite him, and laid his arm upon it in a sort of professional attitude of attention. What could Inspector Wickham of the police have to say to Mr Dennison, barrister-at-law, that was not of a purely abstract or professional character?

"It shall not trouble you long," remarked Wickham, upon whom none of these indications of calmness were lost; "and what I have got to say I shall say in as plain a manner as possible. I am an officer of the detective police, Mr Dennison, as you are aware. I am employed in the case of the woman who lost her life from London Bridge two days ago, and I have come in search of some important information which I believe it may be in your power to render me concerning her."

Still not a quiver of the lip; not a change of hue; not a second's abatement of the black eyes that were fixed on Wickham's face. "I shall be happy to hear what you have to say, Mr Wickham; but I need hardly tell you that this is a case wholly different to any with which I am ever concerned."

"You mean in a professional way, Mr Dennison?"

Dennison nodded.

"I am not addressing you in your professional capacity, sir. The details I am seeking for, the inquiries I am about to make, are strictly private ones. Can you enlighten me in any way as to what Margaret Hall's movements have been since she left Heathcotes on the 10th of January last, or who Margaret Hall's com-

panion was on the night of the 2nd instant—the night of her death?"

"Margaret Hall!" cried Dennison, starting up eagerly, and with a flush dyeing his dark face. "You don't mean to tell me—" His agitation made the words die upon his lips.

"I mean to say that the body of the girl who met her death from London Bridge two nights ago has been identified, since the inquest, as that of Margaret Hall, late of Heathcotes, Staffordshire," answered Wickham, coldly. "I am in a delicate position, Mr Dennison, and you are in a delicate position; but it may save a great deal of trouble and vexation to all parties hereafter if you answer me one or two plain questions now—although, of course, no one knows better than you do, sir, that it rests entirely with yourself to do so or not."

Robert Dennison sank down into his chair, and passed his hand hastily across his eyes. "I am ready to answer any question you choose," he said, in an altered voice, after a minute's dead silence; "but there are circumstances connected with the name of Margaret Hall which make this news a terrible blow to me—a terrible blow," he repeated; and drawing across a decanter of wine that stood upon the table, he poured some out into a tumbler, and swallowed it at a single gulp. "Who identified her?" he cried, as Wickham, silent and impassive, sat and watched his face. "Good God!—there may be some mistake still! Margaret Hall was a simple country girl—a girl whom I, whom all of our family, knew and respected. Who identified her? Who knows that she was ever in London? All this must be seen into at once."

"The person who identified her was a farmer's wife of the name of Sherborne," answered Wickham, quietly. "You know her? I thought so. The girl's late mistress at Heathcotes. She is staying up here in London, it seems; and when she read the description of deceased in the paper, thought, not unnaturally perhaps, Mr Dennison, under the circumstances, that it might be the girl who left her service seven months ago, as it has proved to be. As to the matter being seen into," added Mr Wickham, with an expression that on another face might have been a half-smile, "you may rest quite easy about that. There is no doubt what-

ever about the identification; and what I hope and expect to make equally clear is this: What company was Margaret Hall in on the night of August the 2nd, the last night of her life? Now, Mr Dennison, remembering always that it rests entirely with yourself to answer or not, may I ask if there is any information you can afford me on the subject? August the 2nd—two nights ago?"

"And I answer that I have not the faintest clue to what you seek," answered Dennison, with deliberation. "August the 2nd —Tuesday—I was dining at home on that night, I remember, with a party of friends. Whatever question you have to ask, Mr Wickham, you must have the kindness to put into plainer language. We shall never come to understand each other by enigmas."

"Certainly not. Now, do you object in any way, Mr Dennison —as you have a perfect right to do—to tell me the names of the gentlemen who formed your party!"

"Not the very slightest; although I am wholly at a loss to understand the drift of your inquiries. There were," after a moment's thought, "Mr Drury, Mr Charteris, Mr McIvor, and Mr Broughton."

"No one else?"

"No one. Stay: quite late in the evening my cousin, Mr Gerald Durant, came in for a short time."

"Late in the evening. I suppose by that, sir, you mean a little late for dinner?"

"I do not. My cousin was not expected for dinner; indeed, he only returned from the Continent late that evening."

"And at what time do you suppose he came here to your chambers?"

"Well, I really don't recollect. Eleven—twelve o'clock, perhaps. Yes, it must have been about twelve, I should say."

"And you did not yourself leave home at all that night?"

"Most certainly not. I was with the friends who dined with me, as I told you."

"I see. Would you mind stating, Mr Dennison, if you remarked anything at all unusual about your cousin's manner or appearance on that evening when he visited you?"

Dennison's eyes, when the question was asked, were bent gloomily on the carpet, as though he was still pondering over the death of that "simple country girl, whom he and his family had known and respected." He raised them now, with a sudden flash, a sudden glow, rather, of red light within their sombre depths, to Wickham's face, and for the first time during the interview a guilty look of confusion, of hesitation, crossed his own. If that look had been acted, Robert Dennison must have possessed the genius of a Kemble or a Kean? But it was genuine: and Mr Wickham, tolerably versed in histrionic display, recognized its genuineness, and, being only human, built up a theory in his own mind on the instant.

Mr Dennison was cool and collected in accounting for himself on that fatal evening of the 2nd; was betrayed into an admission of Mr Durant's untimely visit to him; and then, at the first question respecting Mr Durant's demeanour, hesitated and grew confused. What, unless he had grounds for suspecting his cousin's implication in the girl's fate, should cause this change in him? If he was positive of Durant's innocence, what made the last a more embarrassing question to answer than any of the former ones?

"I have no right to expect a reply, Mr Dennison, but it rests with you to refuse to give me one, and I repeat my question again. Did you see anything unusual in your cousin's manner or appearance on that evening of the 2nd when he visited you?"

Under certain conditions of extreme nervous tension most men must have experienced the sudden enlargement of grasp and vision with which the brain seems to become endowed. Before the mind of the huntsman whose horse is galloping towards a precipice, of the prisoner at the bar waiting for the first word of the foreman's lips, the concentrated perceptions of a dozen ordinary years seem to crowd in those few moments of agonized surprise. It was thus with Robert Dennison now. As Wickham questioned him about Gerald, and as he looked up with that expression of doubt, of guilt beyond even his subtlety to hide, upon his face, a train of reasoning, a summing-up of possibilities that it would take me pages to elaborate, had passed—mechanically, it seemed to him; he was in no condition just then for any sensible exercise of will—across his brain. He remembered all the country rumours,

never fully set at rest, with respect to Gerald and Maggie Hall; the strong motive for being rid of her which his relations with Lucia might be supposed to supply; remembered Gerald's strange manner and significant remark of having seen "a Staffordshire face" upon the evening of the dinner-party; remembered, finally, that the only proofs which had ever existed of his own marriage were ashes since yesterday! So much for the past. Now for the future.

If Gerald were publicly accused of having had any share, direct or indirect, in Maggie Hall's death, he was, unless he could positively establish his innocence, irrevocably ruined. And on Gerald's ruin—the ruin of the man who had stood to him and to his secret so staunchly—might rest his own strongest hope of salvation. At this moment the die was probably being cast on which the lives of one, or both, of them should hang. This moment, if ever, was the time for him to speak. Should he not speak? He had committed no crime. He had only made a foolish marriage: only neglected a low-born wife of whom death had ridded him. (Ay, but a shameful death—such a death as would make true men shrink from him, true women keep him from their houses: a death that, if known, would be a blot upon his name, a barrier in his path, such as her life, had she lived, could never have been!) And if the worst came to the worst, *that* only could be discovered. His presence at home on the night of her death was a fact to be proved by half a dozen witnesses. He could but come, eventually, to the shame of having concealed his marriage, and—and the cowardice of having left another man, an honest man and a generous, to bear the burthen of his guilt!

Robert Dennison's face blanched to an awful grey; the dark, massive-hewn lips trembled, almost for the first time in his life. "I—I must have time!" he stammered. "How can I undertake to remember whether there was anything unusual in my cousin's manner or not?"

"In other words, Mr Dennison, you decline giving any answer to the question."

Dennison covered his face with his hands, and felt with a start the cold thick dew that was standing upon his forehead. To what dark suspicions against himself might not this vacillation, this

womanish sentimental weakness, give birth? What had he to do with Quixotic remorse about Gerald's possible danger? Gerald's unstained innocence of course would be his shield. Of what good *is* unstained innocence if it requires alien assistance in time of need?

"You are perfectly right, Mr Wickham. I decline answering any question except upon matters that concern me alone. Of those I will answer as many as it pleases you to ask." And he rose from his chair, and folding his arms, turned round and confronted Wickham with a look that told him plainly he considered it time for their interview to be at an end.

Mr Wickham got up in a moment and took his hat and stick from the chair where he had deposited them. "I fully appreciate your motives, Mr Dennison," he remarked, "and know that you act as one gentleman should do towards another, particularly a relation. The case is a very painful one—it seems likely to me will become more painful still—but I hope you don't think I have exceeded my duty, sir, in the questions that I have asked?"

No, answered Mr Dennison, stiffly, he did not. In such a calling as Mr Wickham's, no doubt it was a duty to go through many interviews as fruitless and as painful to the feelings of the people concerned in them as this one had been to him. And then he consulted his watch, and after comparing it carefully—for his nerve had thoroughly returned to him now—with the clock above the mantelpiece, remarked that it was already past his dinner-hour.

"And you will have no objection, Mr Dennison, I suppose, to give me the addresses of the different gentlemen who dined with you on the 2nd?" said Wickham, taking out a well-worn notebook from his pocket. "This is the last question with which at present I am obliged to trouble you."

Robert Dennison hesitated for a second, then determined that, at the pass to which he had now come, truth, literal, uncompromising truth, was the safest path for him to tread in. He had told no falsehood yet, had not compromised his cousin in aught. If a train of unforeseen coincidences should hereafter draw down false suspicion upon Gerald, it would be for Gerald to clear himself. His own safest course—nay, his own duty now—was to act as straightforwardly as honour consistently would allow him to act, and leave the future to shape itself as it might.

"I am perfectly ready, sir, to tell you where any friend of mine lives. Mr Charteris, Mr Drury, Mr Broughton, Mr McIvor;" and he gave him the address of each in full.

"And your cousin, Mr Gerald Durant?" asked Wickham, pausing after he had carefully written down the different addresses that Dennison gave him.

"My cousin, Mr Durant, lives in the same house with Mr McIvor, 102, Clarges Street."

"Thank you, Mr Dennison. I am very much obliged for the way in which you have answered my questions. Good evening to you, sir. In a few more days I shall probably find it necessary to call upon you again." With which comforting assurance, Dennison having answered that he should of course be willing to see him on business whenever he chose to call, Mr Wickham took his leave.

It was within a few seconds of a quarter past seven when he turned out of the Temple into Fleet Street, and for a moment Mr Wickham stood and pondered irresolute. These young West-end swells, he thought, generally dined about eight. He might have time yet to get a look at Mr Durant on his way to his club, for Mr Wickham was quite intimate with the habits of Guardsmen, as indeed he was intimate with the habits of every class of men in London. At all events, there could be no harm done by looking him up; seeing the house he lived in; speaking, perhaps, to his servant; getting hold, as it were, of the first end of the thread, which would serve as a clue hereafter to Mr Durant's ways of life. He had broken in already upon all his other business by the number of hours he had devoted to Mrs Sherborne; the remainder of the day might as well be given over to the same case; the case which Mr Wickham's professional acumen already made him feel was likely to turn out a very different one to the common-place "street accident" which this morning he and his confrères had believed it to be. To have traced out the old trite story of poverty and of misery to its old trite source had been but a sorry triumph for a man of Wickham's standing. To bring home abduction, cruelty, desertion, if nothing worse, against a man in the position of this Mr Durant, was a prospect that stimulated the keenest emotions, the highest ambitions, of his breast. Yes, he decided he would lose no unnecessary time; he would, at least, call at the house

where the young Guardsman lived, at least put something in train ready for to-morrow's work. And hailing another hansom as he reached the Strand, he jumped in; a quarter of an hour later discharged it with his accustomed discreetness in Piccadilly; and then proceeded leisurely and on foot to No. 102, Clarges Street.

His ring was answered, as it chanced, not by the servants of the house, but by Gerald's own gentleman, Mr Bennett; who, elegantly but plainly dressed, was just starting on his own pleasure—possibly to dine at his own club—and who held his nose very high in the air on perceiving "the sort of person" who was making inquiries for his master.

"The vally," thought Wickham, taking poor Mr Bennett's accurate measure with half a glance. "Ah, ah, young man! you and I will have a good deal to say to each other before we've done, I dare say!" Then aloud, "Mr Durant gone out of town, has he? Well, and when do you expect him back to town, my friend?" resting one of his strong arms within the door, carelessly, as it seemed, but just sufficient to hinder Mr Bennett from slamming it in his face, as he appeared to have every intention of doing.

The term "my friend," the outstretched arm, and a certain latent expression in Wickham's eyes, brought down the nose of the gentleman's gentleman by some inches. Mr Gerald Durant, he knew, was as much in debt as any man keeping above water at all can be; and it suddenly struck Mr Bennett's intelligence that the visitor, as likely as not, was a sheriff's officer, with whom it might be prudent for him to hold civil parlance during his master's absence.

"Well, I don't suppose Mr Durant will be away more than three or four days. We generally stay about that when we go to the Court. If there's any message I can take, I shall be very happy." Mr Bennett, out of his master's presence, had quite the proper drawl of high life. "I rather believe I'm going down there myself to-morrow." Languidly this, and as if travelling was an intense bore to a London man of his *far niente* habits.

"No, no. I don't want to send any message," said Wickham, and as he spoke he stepped quietly inside the passage. "You are Mr Durant's vally, I suppose? I thought so. Then we're all among friends. The fact is, you see"—lowering his voice, and

pushing to, but not shutting the door, "your master owes a pretty round sum of money to a certain friend of mine"—the broad facts of human nature told Mr Wickham that this was a hypothesis likely to savour of reality in the case of any young Guardsman, "and I've just called round to see if things could not be arranged quiet and agreeable for all parties. Now, my friend has no more wish than I have to press matters too hard; and of course it's to his advantage and the young gentleman's advantage—to all our advantages, I may say—that your master should keep on terms with his uncle, Sir John Durant. I understood you right? he has gone to his uncle's house in Staffordshire now? Yes. Well, then, give us your opinion—between friends, of course—is Mr Durant all square with the old gentleman, do you think? *and* his daughter? for you see I know the whole family history by heart. If he is, and if everything's likely to come off pleasant and soon, my friend's the last man—the last man living," said Mr Wickham, warmly, "to be down on any young gentleman of good prospects."

And led away by the visitor's genial manner, feeling thoroughly convinced, too, that his own first view of his vocation was a correct one, Mr Bennett spoke. Right? Why, lord love you!—for being in earnest he forgot to be elegant—nothing could be more right. A coolness? Well, he had never heard anything of it, or never seen anything of it himself. Mr Durant corresponded frequently with all the family, and the marriage for certain would not be delayed beyond next autumn. They had not been home three days from the Continent now, and Mr Durant was off to the Court already—one of the finest seats and oldest families in Staffordshire, that and Lord Sandford's, which was the most intimate friend old Sir John had; and it *was* said meant between them to put Mr Gerald Durant into parliament at the "disillusion," which he, Mr Bennett, believed to be on the eve of taking place.

"So I'm told, so I'm told," said Mr Wickham, after pausing a moment and tapping his chin reflectively with the head of his stick; "but, not being a political character myself, can't say. At all events, Mr Bennett, it's a great matter for a young gentleman to keep on terms with elderly relatives—especially when those elderly relatives have money and only daughters! and the advice I mean to give to my friend is to have patience for a bit. I might look

round here again in the course of a week or so, and I might not," added Mr Wickham, candidly, as he pushed open the door and went out into the street again. "But if I did, it would be as between friends, you understand, Mr Bennett? Just to pick up a word or two from you as to how things are going on."

Mr Bennett nodded intelligently; congratulating himself meanwhile upon the success of his own admirable diplomacy.

"Nowhere near here where I should be likely to see you without coming to the house?" hazarded Mr Wickham; and turning round as though the thought had struck him suddenly when he was already moving away from the door. "If there's one thing I hate more than another in these matters, it is formality. Patience and a friendly spirit, I say to my clients, is a great deal more likely to get money out of a young gentleman in difficulties than dunning and tormenting and bothering his life out! and if there *was* any place, Mr Bennett, any place that you frequent, as one may say, at odd hours?"

Thus pressed, Mr Bennett admitted that there was a retreat in which a good many of his leisure hours, of an evening especially, were passed: the Star and Raffle, a public on your right as you turned down the adjoining mews towards Half-Moon Street. Hearing which, Mr Wickham, with a friendly nod and a remark that if he had occasion again to see Mr Bennett, the Star and Raffle would be the place where he should seek him, started forth in excellent spirits upon his homeward road.

He had gained no direct evidence certainly by his visit to Clarges Street; but he had heard enough collectively, during his afternoon's work, to convince him that suspicion, sinister and thick, was gathering fast around Gerald Durant. And a light shone in Mr Wickham's keen eyes as he walked. No more human emotion stirred in him at hunting down the evidence that should destroy a man's life than stirs in an etymologist as he unravels the knotty derivations of a Greek verb; or in a geologist as he searches for tidings of the Stone Age among the implements of the drift. The "London Bridge Case" had been made over into his hands; and he was simply performing his day's duty conscientiously before going home to his cottage garden and his little children at Kentish Town. If Mr Durant was innocent, so much the better for Mr

Durant: if guilty, so much the better for his own professional reputation. And reviewing all that he had gathered to-day—Mrs Sherborne's story of the old county scandal; Robert Dennison's hardly-wrung admission of his cousin's visit on the evening of the 2nd; the confession of the valet that his master was in difficulties, and looked to a wealthy marriage for his rehabilitation—reviewing all this evidence, line by line, almost word for word, and adding it to certain other facts already in his possession, Mr Wickham felt as sure as he had ever felt of anything in his life that he held the first links of a successful chain of evidence within his hands.

As he passed out of Clarges Street into Bolton Row he stopped—following an old constabulary habit of early days, rather than for any particular reason—and took a look down each of the four openings for a few seconds. Then, as he twisted round with the peculiar pivot-action of the profession, found himself nose to nose, almost in the arms of a gentleman who at that moment was in the act of turning into Clarges Street. The gentleman was dressed in very well-cut evening clothes, partially concealed by a gossamer over-coat of the same pale colour as his face and hair; and in his button-hole was a dandy bouquet, and in his eye an eye-glass.

"Deuce take you!" he drawled; as the sudden turn of Mr Wickham's robust person sent him, with a shock, about six inches from his sphere, and the dandy bouquet flying across the pavement. "I must really beg, sir—"

And then their eyes met, and the sequel of the bellicose command remained for ever unspoken.

"Why, Jemmy!" cried Wickham, laying his hand familiarly on the other's shoulder, and looking carefully up and down every item of his dress, from the exquisite boots up to the single pearl (Palais Royal, I fear) of his necktie—"Jemmy! whatever lay are you on now?"

"Well," said Jemmy, perfectly calmly, the first momentary surprise over, "I'm on what I fancy, in your profession, is termed the swell lay, Mr Wickham, so it's annoying, isn't it, to have my bouquet smashed? You haven't half-a-crown you could lend me, I suppose, to buy another? I'm just going to dine with a friend of mine down here, and come out as usual without a farthing of change about me."

The request, or the tone in which it was made, had evidently the effect of a very excellent joke upon Mr Wickham. "It's a most singular fact, Mr Harcourt," he answered, with great *bonhomie*, "Harcourt—Vavasor—Vere de Vere! whatever the alias is now—but I was just going to ask a similar favour of you. I haven't a farthing's worth of change about me, as luck will have it. However, you're quite swell enough," he added, looking admiringly at him anew. "Swell enough to dine at the Carlton, or the Guards' Club either, I'm sure."

"Ah, that's just where I happen to be going," responded Jemmy, pleasantly. "Odd, is it not, that you should have guessed? I'm just going to call on my friend Durant, here in Clarges Street, and walk round with him to his club to dinner."

"Mr Gerald Durant, 102, Clarges Street?"

Jemmy nodded; not in the least surprised, apparently, at Wickham's knowing any number of particulars on any given subject.

"Are you going to dine with him by invitation?"

"No, not exactly by invitation. I made acquaintance with him over the other side of the water, and he asked me to look him up when I came to town, so knowing his hours—"

"You thought you would do him the honour of dining at his club, and if by a fluke you could get into the card-room, teach him to play écarté afterwards?"

"I've taught him that already," interpolated Jemmy, with a little innocent smile.

"Then, my friend, you won't repeat the lesson to-day. Mr Gerald Durant is in Staffordshire."

"Ah?"

"In Staffordshire, and not likely to be back for some time. You made a pretty good lunch to-day, I hope, Jemmy?"

"Well, no; I made a very bad one. I meant to dine with Durant. The fact is, I've only been in town a few hours, and the dust one swallows here is food enough at first to a man unaccustomed for some years to his native air. Wonderful, really, how people contrive to live in London!"

"Ah, it is—it is wonderful how some people contrive to live anywhere," answered Wickham; not in the least intending to be ironical, and again looking with highly complimentary approval at

his friend's appearance. "I suppose now, Mr Randall"—for a moment Jemmy did change countenance at that word—"you would not condescend to come and have a bit of dinner with me? I know of a tidy place or two Oxford Street way, and—"

"Nothing would suit me better, I assure you," interrupted Jemmy, easily. "While we live we must dine, and if not at the Guards' Club, why in Oxford Street; provided always it is at the expense of another man."

And a few minutes later the pair, arm in arm, and deep in conversation, were making their way northward through Berkeley Square. No play for Mr Wickham with the children in the little Kentish Town garden to-night. As a random shot, hoping only to pick up stray hints as to Gerald Durant's comings and goings abroad, he had invited his newly-found friend to accompany him. With the first answer given by "Jemmy" on the subject, he saw that chance had thrown him across another and most important witness regarding the last day of Margaret Hall's life: and on the spot, Mr Wickham decided that the "bit of dinner" should change into an affair of courses and champagne.

Tea and toast had been sufficient to appease the honest bucolic scruples of Mrs Sherborne. A conscience of a highly sensitive (and expensive) order had to be set at rest now.

CHAPTER XXIX.

DURANT'S COURT.

The light of a cloudless August morning was shining upon the old house and garden down in Staffordshire. Shining with ruddy warmth upon the glistening vari-coloured tiles in which the "rose and crampette," the family badge, was worked upon the pinnacled gables: flecking with shafts of quivering brightness the grey stone mullions of the narrow windows; illuminating in amber and gold the mouldering cartouche shield upon the eastern front which told, as well as you could decipher for ivy, how the house was

built by a certain Hugh Durant, in the year of grace 1570, and where the Durant arms, lichen-grown, and stained with the weather of three hundred winters were sculptured.

August was the month of the year when the Court garden was at its zenith. Geraniums, calceolarias, verbenas, all were in their fullest blaze of colour now; nor was the sight the only sense gratified, as in too many modern gardens is the case. Far and wide across the lawns was blown the subtle, cinnamon fragrance of the cedars; clove carnations and scented pinks were plentiful in the borders; the magnolia in the sheltered south angle of the Court was covered with blossoms that filled the air with their intoxicating sweetness—a sweetness to which the odour from peaches and nectarines in the pleached alleys close at hand was married most deliciously.

It was a garden that, once seen upon a summer morning like this, was apt to haunt, not your memory only, but your heart; as a sweet old tune does, or a fair and noble face out of one of Vandyck's pictures. Every part of it was laid out strictly in accordance with the fashion of the times in which the house was built. There were images cut in juniper or "other garden stuffe;" little stiff yew-hedges, with occasional pyramids, statues, and fountains; spacious turf-walks, set as in the days when Bacon wrote, with burnet, wild thyme, and water-mints to perfume the air when trodden upon and crushed, and in disregardance of all those rules of modern horticulture which keep fruit and flowers distinct, fruit-trees, espaliered, were ranged on either side of most of the bordered walks.

And in its quaint antiquity, in its defiance of science and of fashion, alike, lay the potency, the human element, of its charm. Just as within the walls of Durant's Court you were overcome by inseparable associations of the men who had been born and rejoiced over, who had sorrowed and died there, so under the cedars, and in the shaded walks and alleys of the garden, you were haunted by mute memories of the youthful vows that must have been exchanged, the youthful lips that must have kissed here in the lapse of time between Elizabeth and Victoria. The love-whispers of a dozen buried generations, the roses of three hundred or so dead Junes seemed to have left some lingering echo, some intangible

pathetic fragrance in every nook and corner of the unchanged old place. Love was in its atmosphere! And with the August sun shining over all as it did now, the warm air rich with odours, alive with the hum of bees and voices of birds, it looked as fitting a scene as could have been found anywhere for the enactment of the first brightest act in the play of life. A fitting background to the two figures, a young man's and a girl's, who were standing together on the lawn beneath the cedars; the sun flickering down on the girl's white dress and delicate cheek as she looked up with quiet happiness, with the perfect assurance of acknowledged and requited love, into her companion's face.

For Gerald and Lucia were once more openly affianced lovers; and Lady Durant, too happy in her heart to see them so, no longer gave lectures against undue demonstrations of feeling before marriage. Ten days had passed on now since the prodigal had first returned and been forgiven; and—while Mr Wickham, with unslacked ardour, was pushing forward inquiries in London, and daily gaining fresh evidence in support of the case that he was working—no faintest rumour of the position in which he stood had as yet reached Gerald's own ears or to the Court. His first interview with Sir John Durant had been a characteristic one; the old man for the first five minutes vehemently declaring that unless his nephew could prove his innocence regarding Maggie Hall, he would never receive him back to his fireside or to his affection; and Gerald, with perfect firmness, but admirable courtesy and temper, declaring that he neither could nor would seek to prove one circumstance that should exonerate himself! "I have already told you, on my honour, that I am guiltless," he said, simply. "I have told you that I have had reasons impossible to explain for bearing the imputation silent hitherto, and it rests with you now, I think, to take the stigma away from me or not. Say one word, sir, and I will leave your house in five minutes and return to it if you choose no more." And Sir John, looking into his handsome face, the face that had never lied to him during all the bygone years, had not only held out his hand to Gerald on the spot, but asked him with tears in his eyes to forgive them all for the wrong that they had done to him by their suspicions.

This was immediately after Gerald's arrival at the Court. On

the very day following, Mrs Sherborne, with her dark news of Maggie Hall's death, returned to Heathcotes; and while Lucia in the first happiness of reconciliation was wandering, her hand on Gerald's arm, through the woods and gardens of the Court, many were the whispered asides of the county world as to the opportuneness of Mr Durant's return at this particular season, the heartlessness of Lady Durant in allowing him with such hot haste to be again the suitor of her daughter.

A woman who, at the best of times, barely tolerates the people she lives amongst, is sure of receiving pretty stringent criticism upon her actions when occasion arises. All the pottery ladies who had been snubbed—ignored, perhaps, is the juster word—by Lady Durant, felt it their duty now to express what they, as mothers, thought with regard to her conduct. As long as Maggie Hall lived, Mr Durant—married, or unmarried, who should say?—had been banished from the Court: on the day succeeding her death—let it be hoped a death that was fairly come by!—he appeared openly among them again, as Miss Durant's future husband. Of course, every one trusted sincerely that Mr Durant had had no share in the unhappy girl's betrayal; still it must be confessed that things looked most suspicious against him, and that it would have been more delicate—not to say human—of Lady Durant had she allowed a little longer time to elapse before bringing him forward again in the eyes of the world at her daughter's side.

This was the outside, or neighbourly, view of the position; Lady Durant meanwhile leading her accustomed untroubled life, in happy ignorance of what was being whispered by the people who courted her bow as she drove abroad, or flocked round her carriage whenever it stopped in the village, to offer congratulations on the now openly-acknowledged engagement of her daughter. Led by the instinct which, in a true woman's heart so seldom errs, Lady Durant had never, from the first, shared her husband's suspicions against Gerald, and the only really strong feeling she had with regard to Mrs Sherborne's story was—its indecorum. It was, of course, impossible actually to keep from Lucia the fact of her old playmate's death: the news told, and Lady Durant made an express request that no allusion should ever again be made to the subject in her hearing. It was about the first time in her calm,

sequestered, selfish existence, that any of the grosser accidents of every-day life—passion, abandonment, despair: possibilities unrecognized by Mrs Hannah More as ever likely to compromise the sensibility of a woman of refinement—had been thrust upon her own personal experience; and the easiest way of getting rid of the unpleasant sensations they occasioned was, obviously, not to talk about them. Poor, common, erring human nature being the one element which Lady Durant had never taken into consideration in her otherwise admirable scheme of human life; she was about as well fitted to cope with any of its ordinary manifestations as were the pious cloistered nuns fitted to cope with common storm and common sunshine, when the French Revolution first opened the convent doors and sent them adrift upon the world.

On one point only, kindly and charitable as she was, did the mistress of Durant's Court entertain any decided opinion in the matter, namely, that it was a very merciful thing it had pleased providence the poor creature Maggie should have been taken. It was an awful judgment, upon herself, of course, and a solemn warning to all other young women in that condition of life; still, if a member of any good family *had* been implicated, as was supposed, in the unhappy girl's flight, it was a mercy for which that family, and, indeed, all right-thinking persons, could not be too thankful that she was "released." And when Mrs Sherborne went away, with tear-stained face and aching heart, after the first dreaded ordeal of breaking the news at the Court, the honest woman felt duly cast down at the benignity of Providence with respect to the gentry (as contradistinguished from the lower classes) which Lady Durant, in a lecture of an hour and a half, had pointed out to her.

"My lady spoke up beautiful," she told her husband that night; "all 'about the wicked cease from troubling,' and other texty's, Thomas; but Sir John, he cares most at heart for our poor girl's death. The tears were in Sir John's eyes, mark you, and when my lady had gone away he says to me, 'Mrs Sherborne, be satisfied the right shall be done yet, and whoever did this thing, or caused the girl to do this, shall be brought to justice if I've any power to bring him there.' My lady's very kind and very good, but she has her feeling, you see, Thomas, as a lady, and Sir John he has his feelings as a gentleman; and nothing can be more different than

the feelings of a lady and of a gentleman," added Mrs Sherborne, "where a handsome girl like poor Maggie is concerned."

And she was right. In small domestic matters the kindly weak old man was, happily for himself, entirely under his wife's domination. In any position where he felt his honour, however remotely, to be touched he consulted no one. And honour and justice alike called upon him to be in some sort the champion of the dead girl; every plough-boy, every dairy-servant on his estate, being, according to the old man's stately feudal ideas, a rightful claimant upon his protection. That Gerald had been wholly innocent of taking Margaret Hall from her home he believed now upon his soul. On whose head the guilt of her death lay, God only knew! but had his own son lived and Sir John Durant suspected him of being the man, he would have felt it his plain duty as a gentleman to help to bring him to justice.

It was a case simply in which every chivalrous instinct of his nature bade him take up the side of the weak against the strong. Towards the follies which men, collectively, have agreed to condone, or call by no worse name than follies, Sir John Durant's conscience was as passively elastic as are the consciences of most men who have lived their threescore years and ten on the earth. He was no Don Quixote to espouse the cause of a dairy-girl who of her own free-will had forsaken her duty, and then—following the natural law of such matters—been forsaken in her turn. But Mrs Sherborne's story, the vague insinuations of the newspapers, had hinted to him a far darker suspicion than that of abandoned love or broken trust; the suspicion that Margaret Hall, a lawfully-married wife, had come by her death unfairly. And quietly, and without speaking to any one in the house of what he had done, the old man wrote off at once to his London lawyer, desiring him to inquire into the circumstances of the "London Bridge case" at once, and, if need be, offer a reward in his name for the discovery of any person or persons concerned in the girl's death. "She had been accidentally identified as a farm-servant of one of his oldest tenants," he wrote, "and some suspicion seeming to rest upon the manner of her death, he felt it a kind of personal duty to encourage the fullest investigation in the matter." And the reward of £100 had been duly offered and posted; and Mr Wick-

ham—knowing the quarter from whence it came—had prosecuted his researches with redoubled energy, duly informing Sir John Durant's lawyer how the case was being successfully "worked," and how quiet and patience were, he believed, all that was requisite to bring home guilt to the rightful party in this mysterious affair. Every word of which intelligence was read morning after morning by Sir John at the breakfast table, with Gerald sitting at Lucia's side, and Gerald's face and laugh making the old room bright as it had never been during the last bitter months of his estrangement from the Court.

Robert Dennison's name, as if by tacit consent, was seldom mentioned among them during this time. Once or twice old Sir John had said something about writing and making Robert come down, with Conyers, to talk over electioneering matters, and Gerald each time had remarked, in a joking tone, but with a serious face, that he should certainly go back to London for the occasion; old Conyers and Robert Dennison discussing business being something altogether out of his sphere. The days, however, passed on without Dennison either writing or making his appearance; and as it was now near the middle of August, Sir John began to say that Robert must certainly have gone out of town—probably out of England, as usual, for the rest of the vacation—a belief which Gerald, who shrank from meeting his cousin as though he had himself been the guilty one of the two, was not slow to encourage.

As much as it was in his easy nature to despise any one, he despised Robert Dennison now. A man might be cynical, selfish, facile-principled, and so long as he was a gentleman, so long as his failings were decently glossed over by refinement, Gerald Durant could like him still. What were the majority of the men he lived amongst, and called by the name of friends? Whether Robert Dennison had or had not been legally married to Maggie Hall, there were no present means—setting aside the evidence of those two letters he had returned to him in Morteville—of telling. Married, or not married, there could of course be little doubt as to his wearying in six weeks of the poor creature's society; and Gerald was the last man to blame another for the inconstancy of feeling which in his own case he regarded as a happy natural in-

firmity, rather than an error. But would not a man of common manliness, a man possessing one of the instincts of a gentleman, have shielded all the more scrupulously from evil the helpless girl to whom love bound him no more? To win a woman from her duty was, according to Gerald's light, what many a good fellow would do under strong temptation: to tire of her—well, to tire of everything is an inseparable condition of human existence! but to refuse a woman, so won, protection while she lived; to put her away from her rightful place, if indeed he had been unfortunate enough to marry her—was the conduct of a blackguard. (A fine distinction, perhaps, but none the less real to a man educated as Gerald Durant had been.) Maggie Hall had died a forlorn wanderer upon the London streets—for with bitterest self-reproach Gerald's memory recalled to him the woman of whose face he had caught a glimpse upon the bridge, and whom, in his Sybarite shrinking from misery, he had left to perish: the woman whom Archie Lovell sought to save! He remembered how that wan face haunted him: remembered how he had spoken of it, "the ghost of a Staffordshire face," in Dennison's chambers: remembered the tone of Dennison's voice, the cold sneer that rose upon his lips as he answered. And yet at that moment as he sat there with his friends, in his well-appointed rooms, after his excellent dinner and wines, he must have known what dark shame was in truth possible . . . the fresh face he had wooed bared to the disgrace of London gaslight! the woman who had been his love exposed to horrors of which a violent and self-sought death was the lightest!

In his own way, Gerald Durant was capable of actions that—viewed altogether from the heights—were as intrinsically wrong, perhaps, as any of Robert Dennison's; and yet, in a higher and very different degree, he felt himself as removed from the level of his cousin now as Waters had felt himself removed from the level of his Morteville associates. For Gerald, whatever his faults, had always been, always must be, a gentleman, "*sans peur et sans reproche.*" He had been brought up to think that the unstained honour of a dozen generations, at least, of Durants had descended to him; and that every good thing of life, nay, life itself, should always be held ready for sacrifice in his hand, sooner than that

one jot or one tittle of that bright inheritance should be allowed to pass away. And any man who believes himself to be a heritor by birth of what the world calls honour (or dishonour) is already far upon the road towards meriting the title by his actions. The code on which the Durant principles were framed was not by any means a transcendental or a perfect one. It was simply the very common-place, faulty, narrow code, which men of the world unquestioningly hold to embody honour. But, whatever its leniency on some points, it branded falsehood and cowardice with the brand of shame irretrievable: and in his heart, Gerald felt himself forced to acknowledge that Robert Dennison was capable of both! He had no more thought of betraying him now than he had had during all the bygone months, when his own ruin had so nearly been the price of his generosity. Robert was a poor man; and a single breath of such a story as this might be enough to blight his professional prospects for life. Robert was Lucia's first cousin, Sir John Durant's nephew; and to sully his fair fame was in some measure to sully the fair fame of the family. He would keep his counsel; stand by him, outwardly, with the same staunchness still; only—and this Gerald felt with daily, hourly-increasing repugnance—he could never again make Dennison his companion, could never again bear to see his smooth face here at the Court, or at Lucia's side. Here, in the quiet old garden, under the dear old trees where falsehood, cowardice, dishonour, were words unknown: the trees under whose shade Robert first wooed as his wife the girl who now lay in a nameless London grave, and with only darkest disgrace and shame written over her for her epitaph.

Such thoughts, joined to other personal ones by no means void of pain—for Archie Lovell was neither forgotten nor unavenged in his heart—had made Gerald a somewhat silent and spiritless lover during these early days of his renewed engagement with Lucia. At the present moment, however, standing after an excellent breakfast in the pleasant morning air; his admirable havanna between his lips; the sunlight, the smell of flowers, the song of birds, the sight of Lucia herself—fresh, pure, simple as the white dress she wore—all ministering to the gratification of his keen-strung, pleasure-craving nature, every dark thought seemed very

far indeed from Gerald Durant. The singularly false platitude about the inability of money to purchase enjoyment is never more false than when applied to a man like Gerald. Good horses, good wines, a good cook; a place like the Court to live in during the shooting season; were precisely, now that his youth was waning —at six-and-twenty!—the things which he knew himself to need. In another five years, when he should have done for ever with balls, and every other lingering folly of his youth, a favourite arm-chair at the club when he was in town; horses that were somewhat heavier weight-carriers in the country; and a better chef and better wines than ever, constantly. And all this lay before him in the common course of things if he married Lucia; and she was a very nice girl, poor little thing! fair, gentle, and feminine; and really looking her best, looking as only English girls can look now, with the morning light searching out her uncovered face and discovering no flaw thereon; and the golden sun giving her smooth dust-coloured hair a tinge of red which made it almost—almost for one passing moment—look like Archie's.

"And what sort of people are these—Lovells, did you say? these new people at the Rectory?" Gerald had been in town the last two days and had only returned to the Court late last night. "What is this Miss Lovell like who is coming here? Pretty, I hope?"

"Oh, *dear* no," answered Miss Durant, decisively. Not in the least. I called at the Rectory yesterday, and mamma and I both thought her quite plain. A freckled brown skin and red hair, and large mouth, and so odd-mannered. I hope you won't mind her coming, Gerald? but you know we did not expect you till this evening, and mamma is anxious I should be friendly to the poor girl. You won't mind her now, will you?"

"Well, if she is plain, Lucia, I certainly shall not; neither mind her nor look at her. Whatever she was," he added, in answer to a certain look that he read in Miss Durant's eyes, "I should not be likely to think much of her or any one else when you are by, Lucia!" And throwing away the end of his cigar, Mr Durant put his arm round his cousin's waist and drew her to his side.

"Oh Gerald, please, how can you! only think if mamma—"

"Mamma's jurisdiction is over,"he interrupted her. "If mamma was looking through the window, as I dare say she is, I should make a point of—"

"Oh Gerald, oh please, don't!" cried Miss Durant, her fair face crimson. "Miss Lovell may be here any minute. Just think if the new rector's daughter was to see me like this!"

"Well, I suppose rectors' daughters are sometimes engaged to their first cousins, and even have dim glimmerings of the fearful results of such a position," said Gerald. "Don't be a baby, Lucia! for mercy's sake don't be a baby any longer—I shall like you so much better if you are not—and now come in, and let's have some music, child. I heard you mur— practising something out of Dinorah this morning, and I want to give you a lesson. If you leave off being a baby and learn to sing well—and you have really a very nice voice—I shall be so fond of you, Lucia."

And, his arm around her still, they went through the open French window into the drawing-room together; and then Gerald seated himself at the piano, and while Lucia looked for her music, began rambling, as his way was, from one air to another till he reached Fortunio's song which brought his thoughts back abruptly, and with singular distinctness, to Archie Lovell.

"You are always singing that thing," said Miss Durant, as she returned, her arms full of music, to his side. I can't think why you are so fond of it. I see nothing in it at all."

"No? Perhaps you don't understand it, Lucia," answered Gerald, taking his hands away from the keys, and sighing inwardly as he glanced at the goodly pile of songs that his beloved had brought.

"Not understand? Why I understand French as well as English. *Si vous croyez*"—Lucia's accent was very British indeed—"*que je vais dire.* If you believe that I am going to say whom I dare to love, I should not know for an empire—"

"Ah, Lucia, for pity!" interrupted Gerald, jumping up, and clasping a hand on each side of his head. "Sing, my child, sing 'Beautiful Star,' or 'Ever of Thee,' or any other of your favourites, but for heaven's sake don't meddle with mine. Never translate French again, there's a good girl. I shall be so much fonder of you, Lucia, if you don't try to translate French again."

"But did I not translate it accurately, Gerald? Was I wrong in one word? *Si vous croyez*—"

"Sing," interrupted Gerald, peremptorily—and making her sit down before the piano—"What? Oh, anything in the world that you like—this." And taking up the first song from the heap she had deposited on the top of the instrument, he opened it before her, and Lucia sang.

She had a tolerably correct ear, and a really nice voice; and she had been taught as well as English masters in the country do teach, and when it was marked *piano* in the score she sang soft, and when *forte*, loud: and she played her accompaniments correctly; and altogether irritated Gerald more thoroughly than any singer he had ever listened to in his life.

He had many tastes—love, pictures, books, good horses, good wines—but only one passion: and that passion was music. He could sit through the longest classical concerts—the first English guardsman, I believe, of whom the fact has been recorded—with acute unmixed enjoyment: could pass any number of hours listening to the choruses of Greek or Italian sailors, when he was yachting in the Mediterranean: could hear with a certain pleasure even the "belle voix fausse," of Theresa herself. No music in which music was, from the highest rendering of Beethoven down to the rude choruses of half a dozen sailors, or, lower far, the songs of a café chantant, came amiss to him. He said of himself that he would rather have bad music than no music; and, with the exception of Lucia's singing, this was true. But Lucia's singing was a thing apart: perhaps because he knew he was going to listen to it all his life. He got actually hot and irritable, when he listened to her—it was so correctly irreproachable, so utterly, inexplicably void of nature, feeling, sympathy.

"Brava, brava, Lucia!" This when four consecutive modern English songs had been sung to him, without the omission of a verse, without the wrong playing of a bar; with only that subtle want in every note that caused him such intolerable suffering as he listened. "Of the songs themselves I don't think much, but you really sing them most—correctly. Now, shall we try something of a different kind—that air from Dinorah I heard you singing this morning?"

"Just as you like, but I have not near done my English songs

yet. However, I can go back to them afterwards, if the rector's daughter is not here. '*Sei vendicati assai;*'" the Italian accent, if possible, more loyally British than the French one; "it's rather low, but Mr Bligh thinks my lower notes quite as good as my high ones." And then *dolce* and *piano*, and gradually *crescendo*, according to the printed directions, Miss Durant went on duly with the execution of the song.

Gerald heard her out in patient martyrdom through one verse, and into the middle of the second; then he made a sudden swoop down upon her hands, and before Miss Durant had had time to recover herself, had dispossessed her from her place at the piano and seated himself there instead.

"My dear Gerald, what *is* the matter?" she cried, in her little prim old-maidish way, and smoothing down the ruffled bows of blue ribbon at her wrists. "Do you really mean that I don't know that song perfect? Why, Mr Bligh said—"

"You know it—perfectly perfect, Lucia! You sing it like a bird! only, do you see, the circumstances under which the young man in the opera sings that song are not cheerful ones, and a little —just a little more expression—is demanded than you give to the words. If you remark now, at this particular point, we are told that the voice is to be '*suffocato dalle lagrime.*' He is calling upon the woman he has lost, you know—"

"I know;" Miss Durant always knew everything; "Mr Bligh told me, and said I attended to all the marks very carefully, indeed. It's quite absurd to take things literally in songs," added Lucia, wisely. "I am no more choked with tears than I am ready to expire at any one's feet, and as Mr Bligh says—"

"Shall I sing it to you, Lucia?" interrupted Gerald, who felt himself going mad every time Mr Bligh's name was mentioned; "I can't play the accompaniment right, because, as you know, I play more than half by ear; but I really can, Lucia, if you would only believe me, show you the kind of feeling that should be thrown into the song."

"Oh, yes, Gerald, I shall be very glad to hear you. Still I assure you, Mr—"

But, before that horrible name could sound again, began a low, plaintive prelude—at which Miss Durant smiled pityingly, inas-

much as it was not the accompaniment written and printed, and taught to her by Mr Bligh—a minute later and Gerald's voice was filling the room with its rich flood of true and natural music. As he sang he forgot his little irritation against Lucia; remembered only the part into which, with all the fervour of his happy temperament, he had thrown himself in a moment; and when he reached the point at which he had interrupted her,

"Rispondia a chi t'implora,
Rispondi' o cara a me!"

Mr Durant put his right arm round Lucia's waist, and turned his face caressingly up to hers as the soft Italian words of tenderness and despair floated from his lips.

No picture of mutual and happy love could be prettier than the one they formed at this moment: Lucia in her white dress, and with her slight figure and fair young head half bending over, half turning away from her cousin; Gerald with one hand lightly touching the keys, the other clasped round the girl's slender waist as—his lips parted, his handsome eyes softening with the passionate meaning of the music—he looked up, full and imploringly, into her face.

And the picture was not unseen. A step, unheard, had come up to the open window; a figure, unnoticed, had stood and watched all that little love scene: and then and there—and while in very truth his imagination was addressing Archie Wilson, not Lucia Durant—died by sudden death, whatever fancy for Gerald had once existed in the heart of the woman he loved, or believed he could have loved, best on earth.

"Miss—Miss Lovell!" cried Lucia, starting away from Gerald's arm as the figure moved at last, and a shadow falling across the pages of the song told her that they were not alone. "I beg your pardon, but we were singing, and the time went so quickly—"

"Lady Durant told me to come this way," said a voice quietly; a voice that seemed to send every drop of blood in his body to Gerald's heart. "Don't let me interrupt you, please, unless your song is finished."

And then, with calm and stately self-possession, the new rector's daughter walked into the room.

Gerald had prepared himself, from Lucia's description, for a red-haired, repulsive young person of six-and-twenty; a young person carrying a basket, and requesting subscriptions, and generally speaking through her nose, and talking of the parish and Sunday-schools. He turned round, startled by the voice, and full before him, fresher, brighter than he had ever seen her yet, stood Archie.

"Rispondia a chi t'implora,
Rispondi' o cara a me!"

His prayer was answered already; but Mr Durant did not feel near as comfortable as he had done when dying musically of despair, his arm round Lucia's waist, a minute ago.

CHAPTER XXX.

ARCHIE PAYS HER DEBT.

She was cold as ice, and received the profound bow under which Gerald sought to cover his confusion as Lucia introduced them with a dignified little bend of the neck that to Miss Durant seemed impertinent. The rector's daughter to assume a manner like this when she was being introduced to the future husband of Miss Durant of Durant!

"We had not expected Mr Durant until this evening," she explained, as though to let the poor young person know that her being in Mr Durant's society at all arose solely from mistake. "Would you like to take your hat off, Miss Lovell, or shall we go out a little first? You have not seen the gardens yet, I think."

"I will do whatever you like," answered Miss Lovell, still standing by the window where she had entered, and still with the self-possession upon her face that in Lucia's sight was so unbefitting. "I shall not be able to stay more than an hour or two, so don't make any difference for me at all, please."

"Oh, but, Miss Lovell, mamma invited you to spend the day. I hope—"

"Thanks. I can only stay an hour or two. My father wants

me this afternoon." And Archie half turned away from the lovers, and leaning her arm—more with the gesture of a boy than of a young lady, Lucia thought—against the window-frame, looked out into the garden.

Miss Durant glanced at Gerald, as though to say "Was I not right? Are we not going to be bored with this awkward, plain young woman I told you of?" and saw that a crimson flush was dyeing Mr Durant's fair face, and that his eyes were intently fixed upon a song that, in his first bewilderment, he had caught up and was holding in his hand. Evidently he was annoyed by the girl's curt, indifferent reception of him; evidently, too, he thought her ugly and repulsive, and wanted to be rid of her.

The latter consideration lent a great deal more kindness to Miss Durant's feelings towards her visitor. The poor thing had been invited to spend the day with them; came shyly, no doubt, at paying a first visit alone to the Court—and the Court to Lucia seemed much the same as the Imperial Court of St Petersburg would seem to the Emperor of all the Russias—and now, finding herself *de trop*, offered humbly to go away again in an hour or two.

"We shall not hear of you leaving us till after luncheon, Miss Lovell, and then, if you really must go, you shall give me a promise to come and spend another day, a real long day, with me soon. Perhaps for the next hour it would be cooler in the garden than here. What do you think, Gerald? If we were to take out a book to the Pleasaunce, and you were to read to us. You are fond of poetry, Miss Lovell?"

Yes, Miss Lovell answered; not without a half-smile, for the sense of the ludicrous was never far absent from Archie, and there was something in the idea of Gerald's sitting between them and reading—tender love-scenes perhaps—that, indignant as she was, struck her irresistibly. Then Gerald having stammered out something incoherent about heat and shade, and very pleasant he was sure, if—if Miss Lovell liked it—Lucia ran away to get her garden-hat and parasol, and Miss Lovell and Gerald Durant found themselves alone.

Without hesitating a moment, Archie took a purse from her pocket; drew out something neatly wrapped up in paper from amongst its contents, and walked up to Gerald's side. "Here is

what I owe you, Mr Durant. It is correct, I think—forty-two shillings and sixpence. I had it with me ready, thinking that possibly I might meet you here to-day."

Gerald started back from the little outstretched hand as if he had received a blow. "Miss Wilson! is it possible that you can wish to hurt me so deeply?" he exclaimed.

"I am Miss Wilson no longer, Mr Durant," she answered, not without a ring of mournfulness in her voice. "I've never been Miss Wilson since the day I went with you to London. Papa's poverty and his debts made us live under a false name abroad, the name you knew me by. All that is over—not to be re-called, please. Papa is rector of Hatton, and I am Miss Lovell—a very different person in everything to Archie Wilson! Forty-two shillings and sixpence—you will find it quite right, I think? My travelling expenses from Morteville-sur-Mer to London and back, you remember."

And as Gerald still did not hold out his hand to receive it, she laid the money down on a little work-table that stood beside her, then walked back composedly to her place beside the window.

Gerald was cut to the very quick; but he was too much a man of the world to allow himself to remain in a ridiculous position. Whatever became of the forty-two shillings and sixpence, Miss Durant's curiosity on the subject must certainly not be awakened by finding them there among her embroidery; and so, with the best grace he could, he forced himself to take the money up and put it in his pocket.

Archie's eyes triumphed as she watched him, and something so like the days of old (of a fortnight ago) was in their expression that Gerald in a moment found himself at her side, and with her hand, whether she would or no, clasped firm in his. "Miss Lovell—Archie, forgive me!" he exclaimed in his eager impulsive way. "You don't know what my life is—you don't know how hardly I am placed—how everything is forced upon me. To have to meet you as a stranger—to be treated as you have treated me now! can any punishment, can the worst punishment I deserve, be more than this?"

His face was flushed with emotion; his lips quivered; his eyes softened and filled with passionate eagerness as he looked at her.

"Say one word—tell me you forgive me, and let everything between us be as it once was!" he pleaded, clasping her unwilling hand closer in his.

"Everything as it once was!" and Archie laughed: a hard little laugh that jarred on Gerald's heart. "What do you mean by 'as it once was,' Mr Durant? Before I went with you to London, or—but that would be going back a very long time indeed—before the time when you were engaged to marry Miss Durant?"

"I am not talking of her at all," he exclaimed. "I am talking only of you—asking only for your forgiveness. Will you give it me?"

"I don't know what you mean by forgiveness," said Archie. "I can never feel to you as I used, if you mean that. You told me when I said good-bye to you last I must leave all reckoning up of accounts until we met again, and then, if the balance was in your favour, pay you. I have paid you. Has anything more got to be said between us?"

Gerald dropped her hand in a moment, and stood silent: intently watching her face. "You will never feel for me as you used, Miss Lovell?" he said at last. "I am to take that as your final decision."

"You may take it as you like," she answered, quickly. "With me it is not a question of will. I could not care for you again if I tried, and I do not try."

"Speak candidly. You detest me."

"No, Mr Durant, I do not."

"What then?"

"I think you acted badly to me—badly, badly!" she broke forth, her eyes lighting up, as only blue eyes can light, with sudden passion. "When you could have saved me you did not! When a word of advice from you would have made me leave you and go home, you did not speak it! If I was placed so now," she went on, bitterly, "I could save myself, I would want advice from no man; but then I was a little girl, a child, and I saw less harm in going on with you to London than in landing alone at Calais. Tell me if what I say is true, Mr Durant? Had I any save a child's ideas, a child's knowledge of the world, before that day I went with you to London? And now"—her voice changing with

one of the sudden pathetic modulations Gerald Durant knew so well—"what am I now?"

"Your position is changed," stammered Gerald, with a rising, a guilty sense of her meaning: for until this instant his own infidelity had been the worst offence with which his conscience, or his vanity, had charged him. "Your father being a clergyman, of course I mean—"

"And I mean nothing of all that!" she interrupted him, the light kindling more and more in the blue eyes that looked so unflinchingly into his. "I mean what am *I*, Archie, to myself, to papa, to every one else who cares for me? An impostor, Mr Durant—just that. I was lucky enough to keep that journey of mine a secret, or nearly so, and as long as it remains a secret, every day, every hour of my life, is an acted falsehood. On the day when it becomes known—will you tell me, please, what I shall be then?"

"You will be always fairer and truer in my sight than any other woman living," said Gerald: but he faltered somewhat as he spoke, and his eyes sank. The situation was rapidly assuming dimensions now that placed it beyond the pleasant regions of covert, regretful, inconsequential love-making; and whatever he felt, and however sorry he might be, for the poor little girl, it was simply impossible for him, under the same roof with Lucia, to offer to marry her. "I think, upon my word I do, that you exaggerate the importance of a mere accident, Miss Lovell. No one was to blame—there is nothing that I can see to conceal—"

And Gerald Durant stopped with a start as the drawing-room door opened, and Miss Durant, equipped in a garden hat, a blue veil, and a parasol for her complexion, came up to his side.

"What book shall we take?" she asked, a great deal too taken up with the painful contrast that she felt existed between her own appearance and Miss Lovell's, to remark the expression of her lover's face. "Do you like Tennyson, Miss Lovell? Never read any of it? Fancy, Gerald, Miss Lovell has never read any of Tennyson. Then let us have something of his by all means. The 'Idylls of the King' is the most improving metre for reading aloud, Miss Barlow used to say."

And, neither Gerald nor Archie offering any opinion on the subject of metres, Miss Durant took up a book from her mother's

writing-table; then with a condescending, encouraging little smile to the rector's daughter, put her hand on her arm and led her out into the garden; Mr Durant, who fervently wished himself, or one at least of his companions, at the remotest corner of the earth just then, meekly following.

"You have not seen the Court before, Miss Lovell, I think?" said Lucia, stopping under the shade of the cedars, and turning Archie round to have the lions pointed out to her. "As you have lived so much abroad, I suppose you have never seen a house like this in your life. It was built in 1570 by one of Queen Elizabeth's courtiers, Hugh Durant. His arms, you see, together with those of his wife, Brune of Plumber, are sculptured in a cartouche shield on the pediment of the eastern front.

"Indeed!" answered Archie, putting on a look of great interest, for the expression of Gerald's face had told her already what it cost him to listen to his poor pedantic little betrothed, and she was not insensible to a certain feeling of satisfaction in his pain. "What an old family the Durants must be, if you count back as far as Queen Elizabeth."

"Queen Elizabeth!" cried Lucia, with immense animation for her. "Do you call that old? Gerald, Miss Lovell says we must be an old family, because we can go back to the days of Queen Elizabeth. Why, an ancestor of ours, Geraldine de Durant, accompanied William the Conqueror to England, and in the reign of Edward I. we find that the family were already settled in this parish."

"Edward I.? But I thought Sir Hugh Durant built the house in 1570?" said Archie, with the air of one humbly seeking for information.

"Certainly," answered Lucia, "certainly. You are quite right as to date. This house was first built in 1570, but we have records to show that our family lived in the parish as early as the reign of Edward I. I must caution, you, however, Miss Lovell," she added, "about using the title of 'Sir.' It was not until the year 1611, that my ancestor, Francis Durant, was made a baronet. He was the seventh gentleman on whom this honour was bestowed. During the civil wars of Charles I., Sir Francis Durant was distinguished by his loyalty, which he showed by giving nearly all

his money and also his two sons' lives to the king. After the death of Charles, they say he was so mortified that he clothed himself in sackcloth, and, causing his grave to be dug some time before his death, laid himself there every Friday morning, exercising himself in divine meditation and prayer."

And then Archie took another look at Gerald's face, and her heart softened towards him as it had never done since the moment when she first made the confession of her flight to Bettina. He had behaved cruelly to her; no doubt whatever about that; had all but won her heart—such a heart as she could have given! to pin upon his sleeve for a day; and through him and his selfish weakness the worst folly of her life, a folly whose consequences might darken all her future years, had been brought about. But he was to marry Miss Durant of Durant's Court. He was to spend the remainder of his days with a woman who talked of cartouche shields, and William the Conqueror, and ancestors in sackcloth; a woman who put on a blue veil for her complexion when she walked in her own garden; a woman, ten minutes of whose society seemed to weigh on Archie as no ten hours of her life had ever done before. And her heart softened to him. Bitter, hard, relentless as she had felt when she first heard his voice, first saw his arm around Lucia's waist, she softened to him now that she began to know Lucia herself. Whatever Gerald Durant's sins had been, his punishment, at least, would be an ample one.

"I wish I had your memory, Miss Durant. I never could remember anything, in prose, as long as what you have been telling me."

"It depends upon how one has been brought up," answered Lucia, complacently. "Travelling about, as you have, I dare say your studies have been interrupted; now, I had the same governess—Miss Barlow—for eleven years. From the very first Miss Barlow made me learn the epistle, gospel, and collect every week, and as to the kings of England—"

"Oh, Lucia, do let us go on," interrupted Gerald, impatiently, and with a horrible dread that all the kings since the Conqueror, with a dozen or so collects and epistles, would be repeated for Archie's amusement, and his own torture, on the spot. "It's all very well for you, with a hat and veil and parasol, to stand in the

broiling sun, but as I happen to have nothing on my head, and have no wish to experience a sun-stroke, I must really ask you to hurry—interesting though of course your descriptions are, Lucia dear," he added, demurely.

And Miss Durant, who took every word in its most direct sense, and who was indeed too encased in the triple armour of self-esteem ever to suspect the existence of irony, smiled placidly at the compliment. Then, still affording historical and antiquarian information as they walked, led the way to the Pleasaunce or heath, an inclosure, which lay at the extreme verge of the Court gardens, and to which a vine-covered alley, cool even at noonday, led through the side grounds the entire distance from the house.

The Pleasaunce occupied about an acre of land—not the six acres which Bacon, with his royal disregard of space, directs. Saving in size, however, all the rules that the great philosopher laid down had been adhered to by its original constructor, and strictly followed by all succeeding owners of Durant's Court. There were the thickets of sweetbriar and honeysuckle, and wild vine amongst; and the ground was set with periwinkles, violets, primroses, and other such plants as prosper in the shade. There was "that good flower to the eye, germander;" and sweetwilliam and red roses, and many other of the like low flowers, "that are, withal, sweet and sightly;" while further away from the garden, where the ground rose and fell with natural undulations, and where the neighbouring giants of the Chase gave densest shade, were thickets of holly and larch, of juniper, arbutus, and hawthorn.

Miss Durant after a good deal of deliberation—in one place suspecting a sunbeam, in another detecting an ants' nest, in another a draught—succeeded at last in finding a spot sheltered enough for her partially to raise her veil and dispense with the shade of her parasol; and seating herself here beneath a low-spreading, many-branched old hawthorn on the mossy turf, she signified graciously to the rector's daughter that she might take a place at her side.

"You are not as much afraid of the sun as I am, I see, Miss Lovell, but Miss Barlow always insisted on my taking great care of my complexion, and fair people really tan so dreadfully."

"They do," said Archie, taking off her hat and tossing it on the ground beside her, then running her fingers up through her bright untidy hair in what Miss Durant felt was a most reprehensibly boyish manner. "I was fair myself once. Yes, Miss Durant, nearly as fair as you, and see what I have tanned to! Burnt-sienna; neither more nor less."

"I dare say you are a little sunburnt," remarked Lucia, looking down pityingly at the girl's brown shapely hands; "but fair? I should hardly have thought, Miss Lovell, that you were ever very fair."

"Look above my wrists," said Archie, pushing back the sleeve of her linen dress so as to show a modelled arm, absurdly white compared to the brown hands and sunburnt face. "Don't you think if I took great care, and wore a veil and gloves for two or three summers, I might be fair in time, Miss Durant?"

"You might grow fair*er*," said Lucia, circumspectly. "No doubt you might grow fair*er;* but I think never fair. Miss Barlow used to say that a skin once thoroughly deteriorated can never be restored to its pristine condition."

"That's bad for me," said Archie, shaking her head. "Mr Durant," with a mocking look at Gerald, "what do you think? Would anything ever bring my copper-coloured hands and face to what they should be?"

Miss Durant actually opened her eyes at the audacity of the question. A young girl at her first introduction to a gentleman to mention such a subject as the skin of her own hands and face! It was indelicate: positively indelicate. "I think we had better get on with the reading, Gerald," she remarked primly, and while Gerald was looking, not speaking, his answer to Archie. "That is, if Miss Lovell cares to hear it. We shall not have time to get through one of the Idylls before luncheon unless you begin at once."

"As you like," said Gerald, reluctantly; for it seemed to him just now that to sit and watch Archie in this golden shade—yes, even with Lucia there too—was poetry sufficient. "The heat really makes one feel so lazy."

"Oh, please read," cried Miss Lovell, with well-acted eagerness; "please do not disappoint us. I am so very anxious to

hear the Idylls." And she took the book from Lucia, handed it over to Gerald, then composed herself with folded hands and preternatural gravity of face, to listen.

"The Idylls of the King" were about as unknown to this little outer barbarian as the tragedies of Æschylus would have been. An Idyll she imagined was probably a good deal like an elegy; as Miss Durant had selected the book, it was sure at all events to be improving and horribly dull; and, in the pass to which they had all come now, the best amusement going, perhaps, would be slyly to watch Gerald's face as he read, listen to Miss Durant's annotations, and occasionally offer ignorant remarks of her own the better to draw out the superior wisdom of her companions.

"You have no work with you, I see," remarked Lucia, as Gerald turned over the pages of the book, hesitating which of the four Idylls would be best suited to his audience; and as she spoke she drew out a neatly-pinned roll of embroidery from her pocket. "I always think it is such a waste of time to sit out of doors or listen to reading without working."

"But I can't work," said Archie, "except mending, and that I detest, and besides I'm not clever enough to do so many things at once. To be out of doors in such a place as this, and to listen to poetry at the same time, would be quite enough for me, particularly if the poetry was very well read and the subject very appropriate!"

And she gave a half-sigh and a little significant smile towards Gerald.

Both sigh and smile, as it chanced, were intercepted by Lucia, who on the instant scrutinized, with other eyes than she had yet done, her visitor's personal appearance. Fresh, delicate, refined, the girl looked, with some quivering reflected light brightening into gold her waving chestnut hair, and with her blue eyes laughing under their black lashes, and the white teeth gleaming from the sunburnt face. And a prompt decision rose in Miss Durant's mind that Archie Lovell's visits should be very few and stately so long as Gerald was at the Court! Pretty she was not, nor graceful, nor well educated; but she had the sort of brusque manners, the sort of gipsy good-looks, that might attract, by their mere oddity, a man so prone to be bored with everything to which he

was accustomed as Gerald. And Lucia had no wish that he should be so attracted. The days of her generosity towards him were quite over, now that in her heart, and in her chilly little way, she was beginning to love him. The rector's daughter was not in the least prettier than she had thought; nay, there was something almost repellent in the juxtaposition of those blue eyes and that brown face now that you saw them close, only, only—instinctively, Lucia Durant already was afraid of her. How could she know what sort of ideas a girl brought up among foreigners might not have? how tell that these were not the manners of that horribly outer-artist world which, it is said in novels, young men do in their hearts prefer to all the accomplishments, all the graces, of refined female society?

"Read Elaine, Gerald, if you please. That is the Idyll I know that mamma would approve of most. Miss Lovell, don't you think you would hear better if you were to come and sit on this side of me? You cannot catch the meaning if you are too near to the reader."

"No, thanks, I like to be where I am," answered Archie—Gerald had thrown himself almost at her feet on the turf—"I have just a little view through the trees of the Court, Miss Durant, and if I don't understand the reading I can look at that and think of all the histories you were so good as to tell me. Now, Mr Durant, please. We are all attention."

"Elaine the fair, Elaine the loveable."

Gerald read, as he sang, with taste, with feeling; with an absence of artifice or seeking for effect that gave his reading the simple happy charm of the very highest art. After the first six lines, Archie's imagination had taken fire: at the end of two pages she was leaning forward, her eyes fixed on Gerald, her lips parted and tremulous; all the beauty of that marvellous poetry lighting up her childish face with rapt and eager attention.

"Are you so wise?—you were not once so wise."

Gerald's voice trembled ever so slightly as he read these first words of Launcelot's to the Queen; and for an instant he raised his eyes to Archie's face.

"I have lost my needle," said Miss Durant, with cold distinct-

ness; "be kind enough, Gerald, to leave off reading till I have found it. Listen without working? No, indeed;" as Gerald, not without temper, suggested the alternative. "I should be very sorry to waste my morning in such a fashion, and as I've heard all the story before, I am really not so interested but that I can bear to leave off for a little. Miss Lovell, may I trouble you to rise?"

And as the searching for a needle among moss is an affair demanding time and patience, it was ten minutes, at least, before the reading proceeded.

"You seem quite excited, Miss Lovell," Lucia remarked, glancing at Archie's animated face as Gerald took up the book again. "You must be a great admirer of poetry, I should say."

"Of *that* poetry, yes," said Archie. "I never heard anything like it before. It touches me like music!"—clasping her hands with the un-English gesture, that to her was nature—"I could sit here and listen for hours."

A remark that naturally lent fresh tenderness to Gerald's voice (and filled Miss Durant's mind with renewed and stern determinations respecting the degree of intimacy to be observed with the rector's daughter) throughout all the remainder of the reading of Elaine.

When it was over, Lucia wondered what o'clock it was; then, having satisfied her curiosity by looking at her watch, asked Gerald if his throat felt dry; and finally remarked that she had embroidered a spray and a half while he read. These were Miss Durant's commentaries after hearing the noblest poetry, read by the voice she loved, in such a scene as this. But then, as she said, she had heard the story before.

"And you, Miss Lovell?" said Gerald, turning from Lucia to Archie; "what do you think of Elaine? She deserved a happier fate, did she not?"

"I don't know," answered Archie, with a sort of shyness on her face that Gerald had not been accustomed to see there. "I think, perhaps, to have loved Launcelot—and to die—was better than any common living for her. Would you mind, please, reading again the description of where she sees him first? I mean, after that line:—

"Won by the mellow voice before she looked."

"I thought you had a bad memory, Miss Lovell," Lucia interpolated; but Gerald, the blue eyes flattering him so pleasantly, turned back to the page and read the passage through without a word. What feeling but one could have called forth that shy, sweet blush, on the girlish face? For whom, save himself, could that feeling as yet have stirred in Archie Lovell's heart? He read it through to the concluding lines:—

> "However marr'd, of more than twice her years,
> "Seam'd with an ancient sword-cut on the cheek,
> And bruised and bronzed, she lifted up her eyes
> And loved him with that love which was her doom."

"Bruised, and bronzed, and seamed," remarked Miss Durant, pinning up her embroidery, then carefully picking off every tiny morsel of dead moss or leaf from her dress, as she rose from the ground. "Well, I cannot say that Sir Launcelot would have been one of my heroes. It seems to me he only wants a broken front tooth, and a pair of high shoulders, to be exactly like old Major Seton of Ludbrooke."

"And it seems to me," said Gerald, somewhat indignantly, "that the story of that broken front tooth alone ought to make every woman in her heart think Major Seton a hero! A radical defect in your character, Lucia, is your incapacity for hero-worship."

"Oh, so you have told me before," said Miss Durant, placidly; "but really I never have been taught to see anything admirable in the mere bulldog sort of courage men possess in common with the lower animals. Fancy, Miss Lovell, once when the boys were at Eton together, Ralph Seton, a near neighbour of yours, and my two cousins—as they were all going through the town they saw some people, dreadful common people you know, fighting, and Ralph Seton would insist upon taking part, and got a fall that nearly killed him, and one of his front teeth broken. Now is there anything wonderfully heroic in the story?"

"Not told as you have told it, Lucia, certainly," said Gerald, curiously watching Archie's face meanwhile; "when you consider, however, that the 'dreadful common people' were a huge costermonger very nearly killing a woman, and that Ralph, a little lad of fourteen, rushed in single-handed to the rescue, it rather alters

the case. I have often thought," added Gerald, with the easy generosity that sat so gracefully upon him, "that the characters of all three of us were well brought out upon that occasion. I showed an extraordinary amount of indignant emotion—amounting even to tears, I believe—but no more. Robert Dennison remarked, coolly, that every one probably was serving every one else richly right. Ralph, without a word, went straight to the front—"

"And got knocked to pieces for his pains," interrupted Lucia. "Well, I never did, and never shall, see the beauty of that sort of thing—except of course in poetry. If people have to go through the world (where, as Miss Barlow used to say, two-thirds at least of success depend on appearance), what object *is* there in getting yourself disfigured by fighting for dirty wicked people you don't care about? What do you think, Miss Lovell?"

"I—I?" cried Archie; but with an effort that Gerald noticed keenly; "I think you are quite right, Miss Durant. The description of Sir Launcelot might be Ralph Seton's word for word, and I know that Ralph always was, and always will be, a hero to me. What you and Mr Durant have been saying now makes me like him a hundred times better—if that is possible—than I ever did before." And she raised her face bravely, but blushing furiously still, full up to Gerald's.

Their eyes met; and a new light broke suddenly upon the heart of each. On Archie flashed the truth that Ralph Seton ever since that first day in Morteville had been present in her thoughts; that she liked him, not indeed with a love to be her doom—for the passion of love was still a terra incognita to this heart of seventeen—but with a liking second only to the love she bore her father; a liking dimly akin to Elaine's for Launcelot; a liking that put her fancy to Gerald and for the Russian prince and Willy Montacute very much upon the same level. On Mr Durant was forced the conviction that the heart he had been playing fast and loose with, the only woman in whose society he had ever thought he would like to spend his life, was lost! His memory went back to every little scene in which Archie had ever seemed the nearest to loving him: the time when they stood upon the moonlit terrace by the sea, the time when she found herself alone with him on London Bridge, and he knew that her face, her voice, had never softened

as they did now. Had they softened for the imaginary Launcelot only, or for Ralph Seton? Seton, whom, with all his fine qualities, Gerald had ever looked upon as a man altogether out of the world of love or youth? This was a detail over which, in the first angry flush of disappointment, he did not trouble himself to think. They had not softened for him. He might marry Lucia; listen to her songs; read aloud improving metres to her for the remainder of his days; and Archie—with horrible sharpness the thought stung him—would be entirely unmoved by anything he did or thought or suffered. And up to a minute ago those blue eyes, those parted lips, those little clasped soft hands had befooled him still! He had seen love hidden under the coldness of her manner—love under the passionate reproaches with which she had met him—had read to her with veiled tenderness in every word, with furtive glances at her face—believing himself Sir Launcelot and she Elaine or Guinevere, or both, as regarded the intensity, the hopelessness, of the regard she bore to him.

He very nearly hated Archie on the spot. Vanity was by far the strongest feeling Gerald Durant ever carried into any love affair; and when vanity, as now, received a death-stroke, there needed very little more for his love to give one fierce blaze of disgust, then smoulder (three days generally saw the whole process out) into indifference. I spoke before of French proclivities in his nature: this was one of them. The best friend living to men—the least touchy, the least paltrily vain—it was next to impossible to him to act or feel very generously towards any woman who had omitted to be in love with him. It is not quite pleasant to record in black and white; but Gerald had such a charming way of making you see everything in his light, that you really thought none the worse of him for this or any other weakness when you were with him; and then how much must always be laid to the account of the school in which a man has been brought up! To Gerald, as to his compeers, a woman's heart was a stake to be won; the more up-hill the game, the greater number of odds against him, the more exciting the contest. Lost, his own special amusement in the game over, and the bits of red and white bone with which a successful adversary has scored his tricks at écarté were scarcely, according to his creed, more fitting objects for a wise man's regret.

You will nearly always observe this kind of optimist philosophy to prevail among the class of men who at once cultivate love as a pastime and study it as a science.

"Dear old Ralph!" he cried, rising hastily from the ground, and not deigning to give another glance at Archie Lovell's face. "I can imagine any woman thinking him a hero, if he is like what he used to be in the days of old. Still, Lucia," his voice growing soft and tender as he turned to her, "I don't know that I wish to have you changed in anything."

"What! not in my incapacity for hero-worship, Gerald?"

Gerald's answer was a whisper that brought the colour to Miss Durant's cheeks; and then, with more little fond murmurs passing between them, he folded her muslin scarf round her shoulders, handed her her parasol, arranged her veil round her face, and offered to carry her work-basket to the house with most lover-like and demonstrative devotion.

"And how is it that you know Major Seton, Miss Lovell?" asked Lucia, as they were walking slowly back through the garden, and growing very much pleasanter in her tone now that Gerald's undivided attention had returned to herself. "I should not have thought you had had time yet to get acquainted even with any of your neighbours."

"Oh, we have not seen much of Major Seton here," answered Archie, turning aside her face; "he only returned from Scotland the day before yesterday, and—and—has been round to see us three or four times since—but we knew him, years ago, when I was a child in Naples. He is more than a brother to me—he is papa's best friend," she added quickly, and with an intuitive feeling that Ralph was one of the people Miss Durant would be likely to disparage.

"Ah! that will be very pleasant for you, then, to live so near him. Major Seton is an excellent sort of person, I dare say, when you know him. We have only seen him once since his return from India, and mamma and I both thought his manners rough, but—"

"You did not understand him, I should think," broke in Archie bluntly. "Ralph Seton rough! Why he is the kindest—the gentlest—" but here, chancing to meet Gerald's eyes again, she

interrupted herself abruptly, stopped a moment, buried her hot face in a great branch of jessamine that hung down low across the path, and did not open her lips again till they reached the house.

"A strange unmannered kind of girl, Gerald," said Miss Durant, when some minutes later they had said good-bye to Archie at the park-gates; for no persuasion could induce her to remain longer with the lovers. "But I don't know that there is anything really to dislike in her. How excited she got about the reading and old Major Seton! There must be something serious there, I should say, shouldn't you?"

"Really, Lucia, I don't know. I cannot say that I feel any special interest in the state of Miss Lovell's feelings."

"Ah! did you think her pretty then, Gerald, or was she like some one you have known, or what? for I am sure you looked at her enough all the time you were in the Pleasaunce."

"She is like some one I have known," answered Gerald, "and I do not think the term 'pretty' is one I should apply to her. Will that do, Lucia?"

"I—I was afraid you did not care about her!" cried Miss Durant, looking radiant. "I mean I thought most likely you were a little bored by the poor thing—but I'm half afraid mamma will be vexed that we let her go so soon. Don't you think, now, we might ask her and Major Seton to spend the afternoon here to-morrow? If there is an attachment between them we ought to do our best to bring it about, and you know you want to see Major Seton. Croquet and high-tea upon the lawn would be pleasant, Gerald, eh?"

"Remarkably pleasant," answered Gerald, laconically, and watching the last flutter of Archie's summer dress behind the trees. "You are beginning to understand my tastes beautifully, Lucia."

"And"—after a minute's silence—"is the person Miss Lovell reminds you of some one you care about, Gerald? I won't ask you any more."

"Some one I care about? Well, my dear Lucia, I should think you could answer that question for yourself. Is Miss Lovell in the very slightest degree like you?"

Miss Durant, with pretty consciousness of the absurdity of the question, answered no, and was satisfied.

CHAPTER XXXI.

IN THE SECOND COLUMN OF "THE TIMES."

A SOLITARY first-class passenger had alighted from the midday express that stopped by signal at Hatton; and, directed by the one porter the station possessed, was starting across the fields to Durant's Court just as Archie Lovell bade good-bye to Gerald and Miss Durant at the park-gates.

The sultry morning had softened into one of those silent mellow days in which English fields and woods and hedge-rows wear a pathos and a beauty all their own. A yellow sunshine, a smalt-blue heaven, seem ever somewhat of an anachronism in England. To-day, mid-August though it was, there was just that foreshadowing of change—that pallor in the sky, that haze across the reddening woods that fitful freshness on the western wind—which gives our northern summers their peculiar charm; one which the glaring splendour of the south for ever lacks; the charm of evanescence and of frailty. The coarsest, the least sympathetic man could scarcely have walked untouched among the golden fields to-day; the fields that in another month—the sky paler, the distant woods more hectic—should be shorn and crisped by early frost—brief summer already in its grave! Even the stranger, ordinarily a much more interested observer of green cloth than of green fields, was moved into something near akin to genuine feeling, tender memories, as he went slowly and lingeringly upon his way.

How familiar and how strange the sights and smells of English fields, the babble even of the little meadow stream beside the path, seemed to him after all these dreary years of disuse! Years in which he had dissipated health, strength, energy—everything save the intolerable weight and tediousness of living: years in which he had played without excitement, drank without solace, roamed over the world without making a friend, and worked harder than many an honest man at his miserable vocation without at any time seeing more than a month's dinners ahead. What a ludicrous lottery it all was!—that ever-present burthen to the thoughts of unsuccessful men—manipulating a cigarette absently, then holding it

unlit between the fingers of his delicately-gloved hand. His brother, without any capacity whatever for enjoyment, but simply because there chanced to be eighteen month's difference in their ages, the possessor of two or three estates of pleasant English land like this; and he, a man who could have taken intense pleasure in his shooting and his fishing and his farming, an adventurer, a frequenter of foreign cafés, a picker-up of napoleons at cards, an intimate acquaintance of the police. Everything for which his nature did not fit him! How easy it was, he thought, for elder sons to keep right! If a nice little allotment—say, even, of eighty or a hundred acres of land like this—with a good house to live in, and an income to keep it up upon, were to be assigned to him now, how honourable and straight-walking a fellow he would be to the end of his days! Failing this—well, failing this, he must just remain what he was: the outcast younger son of an old race, Edward Randall, *alias* Colonel Vavasour, *alias* Captain De Vere, *alias* Jemmy Waters; obliged by the fact of being human, to eat—by the fact of being disgraced, to earn his food as he could; and at the present moment employed on the kind of business which men even with no special pretensions to delicacy or honour would shrink from as from the last disgrace. The business of exacting hush-money out of a girl's fears, or of selling her secret to the highest bidder—her own father, or the Durants: this was simply a matter of detail—that he could find.

Captain Waters lit up his cigarette, and with a slow slouching step, very different to that airy one which he was wont to wear before watering-place spectators, walked on, miserably meditating, a little perhaps on the ignominy of his own position, but a great deal more upon the injustice of the laws of primogeniture, in the direction of Durant's Court. At a sudden turn in the path, just where the stream to which he was mechanically listening still wound out of sight beneath a clump of alder bushes on the bank, he suddenly perceived a girl's figure approaching through a field of standing corn, not twenty yards ahead of him to the right. He stopped instantly, drew himself behind the shelter of the bushes, and watched her. It was Archie Lovell; dressed in a fresh linen suit, just as she used to be upon the Morteville sands, a bright flush upon her face, a great heap of wild flowers—field

poppies, clematis, briony, dog-roses—in her arms. Prettier and more like a child than ever she looked, and altogether a picture, Captain Waters thought admiringly as she approached, breast-high among the waves of barley, and with the misty woods for background, and the pallid, golden-grey sky above her head!

He waited until she was within five or six yards from the trees under whose shade he stood, then stepped quietly into the path, taking off his hat, as he pretended, with a start of surprise, first to recognize her. The blood rushed in a moment over the girl's face and neck. She gave a hurried look on all sides, as if for escape or help—a look whose significance was by no means lost upon Captain Waters.

"You are surprised to see me, Miss Lovell," he remarked, as in her very terror she stopped and offered him her hand; "and the surprise is mutual." He had had a letter three or four days before telling him of Mr Lovell's departure from Morteville. "I had no idea that you were coming to England yet."

"We have been in England a week," stammered Archie, mortally terrified, yet with a half-hope now that Captain Waters' appearance here might be unconnected with herself. "We had not meant to come so soon, but as the Rectory was standing empty and there was nothing to keep us in Morteville—"

"Ah yes, very wise, I am sure," interrupted Waters, jauntily. "Very wise in any one not to stay a day longer than there was necessity for in that *gottverlassen* place. I got away earlier myself than I expected, and have been spending the last few days very pleasantly, very pleasantly indeed, with some of my people in town. I suppose you don't know if Gerald Durant is at the Court still, Miss Lovell? I could not find him in London, so came down here on the chance of seeing him."

"Yes, he is here," answered Archie, taking renewed heart of grace at the thorough unconcern of Captain Waters' tone. "I have been spending the morning with Miss Durant," she added, "and am on my way home from the Court now."

"The Rectory is some distance off, is it not?" asked Waters, rather to gain time than because he had any interest in the parish topography. "About two miles from the Court—just a good walk—and you like Miss Durant? That is pleasant for you both; you

will be nice neighbours for each other. No talk still of her being engaged to her cousin Gerald, I suppose?"

"Every talk of it, I should think," said Archie, stooping down and examining the petals of one of her wild roses. "It is all quite settled; indeed, Lady Durant has already invited us to the wedding in the autumn."

"And you believe that wedding will take place, Miss Lovell?"

"I—I—of course I believe it will," blushing hotly, at she scarcely knew what meaning in Waters' voice. "Why should it be broken off?" she asked, trying very unsuccessfully to smile and look unconcerned.

"Because—Miss Lovell, have you ever heard of Margaret Hall?"

She raised her eyes up with a sense of intense relief to Captain Waters' face. It was not to herself, then, not to her miserable secret—the secret that night and day never ceased to haunt her—that he was alluding! "I have heard the name, Captain Waters, and something of the story since we came here. But every one looks upon it as a thing of the past now. You know, of course, that Margaret Hall is dead?"

"Yes, Miss Lovell, I do. I know a good deal more than I care to know in the matter; indeed, it is on business directly connected with it that I have come down to see Gerald Durant to-day. He is—well, I don't know that I need hesitate about telling you! If you had remained abroad I had hoped, sincerely hoped," said Waters, compassionately, "that nothing of all this would have reached your ears; but as you are here, so close to Gerald and to his people, you *must* hear of it before very long, and by warning you now, it seems to me that I shall be acting fairest by you both. Gerald Durant (unknown, I verily believe, to himself) is at present in a position of the most extreme danger with regard to this girl Margaret Hall's death, and perhaps—mind, I only say perhaps—it may be in your power to be his salvation."

The flowers fell in a heap at Archie's feet: she clasped her hands together eagerly. "Mr Durant in danger, Captain Waters, and I be of service to him? I save him?"

"Well, I believe so, Miss Lovell. I may be wrong, of course, but I believe so!" He rested his forehead an instant on his hand, and an admirably well-acted expression, half of pain, half bewilder-

ment, came over his face. "The question is," he went on, after a minute, but looking away from her as he spoke, "would you do it?"

"Would I? Why, of course I would!" she cried, with a hearty readiness that, had Captain Waters been learned in any subject so delicate as the intricacies of a girl's heart, might have told him what kind of regard she really bore towards Gerald. "Tell me what I can do to help him, and I will do it in a moment, gladly."

"Well, that is generous of you, Miss Lovell, very: but women are, I believe, extraordinarily generous always in these matters. Gerald Durant—really it's not an easy thing to speak about—is supposed, for reasons which you may perhaps guess, to have had an interest in the death of Margaret Hall. It took place on the night of the 2nd you know, and unless he can prove with extreme minuteness what he was doing at that time, I fancy things are likely to go pretty hard with him. Now, of course, any one who happened to be in his company on that night, might, if they chose, come forward and be of service to him. Do you understand me?"

"No, I do not," she answered, hoarsely, leaning her arm heavily against a stem of the overhanging alder, and with every tinge of colour dying on her face and lips. "I do not understand you. What do I know of this Margaret Hall, or of her death?"

"Nothing whatever, Miss Lovell. The question rather is, do you know anything of Mr Durant and his actions on the night when her death took place?"

"Of course I do not. What right have you to question me? You are trying to frighten me still as you did in Morteville, and you will not succeed, sir! I will tell papa and—and another friend I have the whole truth, and they will protect me from you. I think you should be ashamed to persecute me so. What have I ever done to harm you?"

Captain Waters shrugged his shoulders, then calmly took out a folded newspaper from his pocket. "You spoke to me in this—well, I won't use harsh words, in this very impetuous spirit once before, Miss Lovell, and I bore you no ill will for it. I shall bear you none now. The whole affair, as I am going to show you, is already in stronger hands than mine, and if you will take my

advice you will keep your nerve, and above all your temper cool. As to consulting your friends," he added, "I should think it would be about the very best thing you could do. Read this, please." And he opened the paper, a copy of *The Times*, and pointing out an advertisement in the second column of the first sheet, put it pleasantly into her hands.

"INFORMATION WANTED.—The lady who lent a scarlet travelling cloak to another lady on board the excursion steamer Lord of the Isles, somewhere between Morteville-sur-Mer and London, on the 2nd instant, is earnestly requested to send her name and address immediately to the undersigned.—S. Wickham, Lilac Court, Inspector of the City district of Police."

As Archie Lovell read the advertisement—painfully, slowly read it, with burning eyes, with a brain that seemed incapable of taking in its meaning—Waters stood silent and scanned her face narrowly. His knowledge of the case, and of Archie Lovell's possible implication in it, was necessarily confined as yet to the most meagre outlines, Mr Wickham being far too astute a general to betray the plan of his attack to an auxiliary save on that particular point at which his assistance was required. But long experience in the lower grades of human nature, long experience in the lower walks of intrigue—if only the intrigue brought into action in hunting down victims for the pharo or billiard table—had developed not a little quasi-professional acuteness in Captain Waters himself. During his first interview with Wickham, in spite of all his friend's flowery circumlocution, he had felt certain that legal evidence of some kind was wanted respecting Gerald Durant's actions on that second day of August when he spoke to him from the Calais pier: certain, also, that the cause for which Mr Wickham gave him a dinner and (for Oxford Street) excellent champagne, must be an urgent one. His story, such as it was, told; and Wickham had affected to treat the whole affair as a joke, dexterously changing the conversation to completely foreign subjects before they parted. But Captain Waters perfectly well knew that the eyes of Mr Wickham and of his satellites had watched his comings and his goings ever since; and by dint of all kind of underhand research, joined to the vague hints thrown out by the newspapers, had succeeded in constructing a theory tolerably near

the truth, as to the perilous position in which Gerald Durant stood; the kind of price that his own evidence, or opportune disappearance out of England, might hereafter command. Theories, unfortunately, however, not possessing any particular market value, the only course open to Captain Waters had, till yesterday, been to hold himself in readiness and play a waiting game. Then, suddenly the advertisement that he had read in *The Times* had given form and coherence to the whole shadowy chain of suspicion, which up to that moment his own brain alone had put together; had supplied him, too, with light as to the precise link in the evidence of which Wickham was at present in search. And on the instant Captain Waters decided to risk a first-class return-ticket to Staffordshire without delay. Into what market the knowledge of which he had to dispose should be brought—whether his price should be paid by Mr Durant, in some Quixotic desire to save Miss Lovell, or by Miss Lovell, in some praiseworthy desire to save herself—Captain Waters, as I have said, cared little. Only as selfishness was, he held, a sounder general basis to proceed upon than generosity; and as experience had shown him that women are more amenable to reason than men in all cases of converting fear into money; it was as well, perhaps—this he thought now, as he stood watching the girl's terror-stricken face—that chance had thrown her, not Gerald Durant, first across his path.

"You look pale, Miss Lovell—take courage. The word 'police' is a formidable one, no doubt, to a young lady, but take courage. Everything may be hushed up yet."

"Do they know?" asked Archie, looking at him with frightened, dilated eyes, "do these people—does the man who wrote this—know where I am now?"

The simplicity of the question made a half-smile stir under Captain Waters' little blonde moustache. "Know where you are! certainly not, my dear Miss Lovell. Do you think I should be talking to you in this informal way if anything was definitely known? I see that you are bewildered and shocked—now sit down on the bank—here in the shade"—she obeyed him mechanically—"and I will put it all before you as plainly and as briefly as I can: Mr Gerald Durant some months ago was accused—wrongly, we will assume—of being Margaret Hall's lover, some have said

her husband, and is now supposed to be implicated in some mysterious way in her death. Very well. A reward having been offered which has stimulated to the utmost the zeal of the police, inquiries have already gone so far that the whole matter is, I fear, certain to become public." She gave a start of terror at the word. "Mr Gerald Durant will, in fact, be brought before a magistrate to give some account of himself and of his actions on the night of the 2nd. And now you will understand what I meant by saying that any one who was with him at that time might possibly come forward and save him. If it could be proved that he was in another place and in other society at ten o'clock"—he paused a moment and looked steadily in her face—"the time when this young person (so unhappily for every one connected with her) ended her life, what, in law, is called an alibi would be established, and Mr Durant would be free."

"And what have I to do with it!" she cried, passionately. "Why must I suffer? Why must I—"

"Miss Lovell," interrupted Waters, gravely, "these are not words that I ought to allow you to speak; these are not considerations for you to discuss with me. How you will act will be for your own future consideration. The duty which, meeting you suddenly now, it has seemed thrust upon me to fulfil is simply to warn you of the position in which you are likely to be placed, and I have done it! I have done more, Miss Lovell. My evidence has already been sought—well—by a detective officer; it would be false kindness to make too light of anything now—respecting the way in which Mr Durant left Morteville, the companion with whom I saw him at the Calais pier; and remembering the promise that I made to you in Morteville, I have managed so far to screen you. When I saw this advertisement in last night's paper, I certainly thought it right to come down here, see Gerald, poor fellow! and offer such help as I could give him at once. But meeting *you*, Miss Lovell, has given another direction to my thoughts. Unless you bid me speak, I will remain silent still; and then, as far as I can at present see, only your own free will—or—or Mr Durant's—can bring you into the trial or before the public at all."

Into the trial—before the public! She, Archie Lovell, who yesterday, it seemed, took her doll to her pillow with her, brought

forward to tell her own shameful story before men in a public court (she had been in the courts of law in Italy, and she remembered how the lawyers jibed and how the crowd hooted the witnesses); her father disgraced; Ralph Seton's love forfeited; every happiness of her life over—and for what? Because she must save Gerald, Miss Durant's promised husband, the man whose selfish weakness had alone led her into all this labyrinth of falsehood and of wrong.

The poor little girl was far at this moment from grasping anything like the true proportions of the danger that menaced her. Vaguely she remembered how, standing by Gerald's side, she had put her cloak around the miserable woman upon the bridge; vaguely realized that to save Gerald Durant from some mistaken suspicions that rested upon him, she would be brought forward and have to tell the story of her journey with him to London, and disgrace her father, and estrange Ralph and all good men and women from her for ever.

"I thank you for what you have done, Captain Waters. Try to screen me still. Don't go to the Court—don't tell the Durants of this. Mr Durant would not injure me, I think, even to help himself; but Lucia—Lady Durant—what would they care if he could be saved by our disgrace? Help me still. I have no one to help me but you." And the childish white face that looked up to him imploringly touched even Captain Waters' heart with a sensation of pity.

"I will stand by you to the last, Miss Lovell. As far as a man of honour can"—the word came trippingly from his lips—"I will stand by you even when I am upon my oath. If you still wish to tell your father, I will come with you to him at once and—"

"No, no!" she interrupted, "not to him. He shall know nothing of all this as long as I am able to bear it alone." And then the thought of him, happy with his pictures and his poems at the Rectory, looking forward to fair years of peace and honour in his new home, overcame her, and with a convulsive sob she buried her face down between her hands.

Waters watched this outburst of emotion narrowly. Was she foolish, and vacillating, and a coward, like other women? he wondered, just as he had wondered that day upon the Morteville

sands. A weak girl, who would say one thing to him and another to the next person who addressed her, and incapable alike of coming boldly forward to Gerald's rescue, or of dogged resolve in standing staunch to herself and leaving him to his fate. If she were made of materials like this, Waters thought, the sooner he gave her up and saw what was to be made out of Gerald Durant himself the better.

He was quickly re-assured of the kind of character this girl of seventeen possessed. That one convulsive sob was the first and last sign of her weakness. She kept her tears back bravely; steadied her brain resolutely to think; went through a moment's fierce combat with every impulse of her nobler nature; then succumbed and spoke. "I don't, of course, understand all this yet"—looking up to Waters with a face of marble, with tearless eyes, and hard-set lips—"but, whatever happens, I am determined in one thing. I will *not* hurt my father. I will *not* tell that story of my going to London to save any one. Mr Durant must help himself, as I should have to do if I was in danger. Now you understand me. What return do you expect for befriending me, Captain Waters? Money? I can get it—tell me how much—and I can get it."

He shifted about somewhat uneasily, then, "it pained him inexpressibly," he said, "to accept any assistance whatever from her, but he was horribly hard up just now, all this business might put him to a great deal of expense—travelling expenses, interviews, if requisite, with lawyers, and so on—and if, say, fifty pounds or so, could be forthcoming—?"

"You shall have what I can get," she interrupted him, sullenly. "I will beg from a friend I have, and what he gives me I shall send: no more. What is your address?"

He took out a card and gave it to her; remarking, delicately, that the sooner any little assistance she could render him was sent the better; then asked if he might attend her part of the way back to her father's house. "For," he added, taking out his watch, "I have quite decided now not to see Gerald Durant. My allegiance is to you, and to you alone, and if I return at once to the station I shall be just in time to catch the next fast train to London."

"Go, then," said Archie, without offering to leave her place, "I shall not return yet. I want to be alone."

"And you will have no ill-feeling towards me, Miss Lovell, because chance has made me the bearer of this disagreeable news?"

"Why should I? You are doing what you think best for yourself, I suppose, as I do—as all the world does!" And, just touching his out-stretched hand with her death-cold fingers, she burst into a laugh: a hollow, old-sounding laugh that even Captain Waters did not find it pleasant to listen to.

When he had walked away about half the length of the field he turned and saw her sitting still—the pale face blankly upturned, the motionless hands lying on her lap, just as he had left her. Captain Waters never more heartily wished that he was an elder son and free from the necessity of bread-winning than at this moment. Only, as money was to be made, and as he was obliged to make it, he was glad that he was able to do the girl a benefit, not an injury, by his work. She was a woman worth working for and with, he thought; for—so unconquerably averse to the sense of our moral degradation are we—even this man strove to whiten himself by saying that his victim's motives were very little higher than his own! Let her good name, her worldly reputation, be at stake, and, with all her soft girlishness of manner, she would save herself—even if the ruin of the man she loved yesterday were to be the price.

"And quite right too," Captain Waters decided, as he turned and went away. "What has this fellow, Gerald Durant, done to merit her generosity?"

Little did he think where, and under what circumstances, he would see the face of Archie Lovell next.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE LULL BEFORE THE STORM.

Ludbrooke, Major Seton's place, was about three-quarters of a mile distant from the Lovells' cottage, and before Ralph had been twenty-four hours at home, it seemed just as much a matter of course that his time should be passed with them as in the happy days of seven years ago at the Villa Andreo, in Genoa. The days when every morning Archie used to wait for him, a flower ready in her hand, all a child's delicious prodigality of love upon her lips, at the broken doorway of the old Italian garden: days when his only rival was Tino! when looking forward to the years to come, he was wont to feel the impossibility of Archie Lovell, among all the children of the world, ever deteriorating to the common standard of commonplace humanity as she grew up. She might not bloom for his wearing, of course; what was there in him to deserve a different fate to other men's? But, whether for him or for another, the frank nature *must* keep its frankness; the sweet lips their candour; the honest eyes their truth. All were forsworn now—and he was haunting her steps still: thrilling if only a fold of the girl's dress touched him as she passed; his pulse beating like a boy's whenever the blue eyes stole up to his; a spasm of hot jealousy contracting his heart every time that Gerald Durant's name passed her lips. And still steadfastly saying to himself that the passionate folly of his life was cured; that, following the voice of honour and of prudence alike, he had put Archie Lovell away out of his heart!

He came to the Rectory soon after noon on the day succeeding Archie's visit to the Court, and found her alone in the garden that lay in front of the cottage, working with her own hands, and with a feverish sort of energy, at cutting up the turf of the little grass-plot for future flower-beds. She threw down the spade the moment she saw Major Seton, and running up to his side, said that she was tired and sick of work; then stole her hand under his arm and led him in, almost, he thought, with the unconscious warmth of old Italian days, to the house. The Rectory was a low-

roofed, irregular cottage, all on the ground floor; one of those often added to country parsonages wherein more space is occupied by useless closets and passages leading nowhere, than by actual living rooms; but which, standing in its own upland garden and orchard, exposed to every wind that blew, seemed to Archie's gipsy instincts a far more congenial place to live in than Durant's Court —sequestered shade, stately cedars, and cartouche shields included. At the present moment every room, every passage of the cottage, was strewed with Mr Lovell's newly-unpacked bric-à-brac—the thousand pounds' worth of toys that Ralph Seton's money had saved from the hammer. Dresden and Sevres, Marqueterie and Buhl, met you whichever way you turned; and it was only by dint of much careful steerage that Archie brought Major Seton safely through to the little parlour, where the table was already spread for the Lovells' early dinner—luncheon, as Bettina, on the strength of new ecclesiastical dignities, insisted it should now be called.

"I have an invitation for this evening for you, Miss Lovell," said Ralph, taking a tiny note from his pocket after he had stood and watched the girl for three or four minutes, as his custom was, in silence. "It came enclosed in one to me, and I thought I might as well walk over at once and see what your answer would be. I called late last night to see you—to smoke a pipe, I mean, with your father—and Mrs Lovell told me that she had sent you to your room, ill."

"Ill!" cried Archie, throwing off her hat with a laugh, and displaying cheeks like damask-roses, eyes that an unwonted light made brilliant. "I came back from my walk flushed, as I am now, and nothing would do for Bettina, but I must go off to my bed at once. If I look a shade more sunburnt than usual, papa and Bettina, or both, are sure to think I am dying. What is this invitation about? I didn't think that any one in Staffordshire, but you, knew our name as yet." And she took the note from Major Seton's hand, and standing close enough for him to look over with her if he chose, broke the seal, and read it through.

It was a prettily-worded invitation from Lucia Durant; every line mathematically equi-distanced, and with neat little commas and semicolons exactly where they ought to be, expressing Lady Durant's sorrow that Miss Lovell had not stayed to luncheon

yesterday, and asking her to come over to croquet and high tea that evening. If Mr and Mrs Lovell would accompany her, Lady Durant would be charmed; if not, perhaps Major Seton would be Miss Lovell's escort, as they had written and asked him to join the party.

"Well," said Ralph, who had been reading, not the note, but Archie's face, "do you care to go, or would the long walk be too much for you?"

"The long walk would not, for certain," she answered; "but —well, Major Seton, honestly, I don't think I am very fond of Durant's Court. Something seems to stifle me there, and then, you know, lovers are *not* amusing, are they? Gerald Durant was very well by himself, as a partner at a Morteville ball; with Miss Durant alone, I could find something to say perhaps about her trousseau, or the bridesmaids' dresses, but together—no! How can they want me? How can Mr Durant want any other society than his cousin's?"

"Because he does not happen to care about her, I suppose," said Ralph, drily. "Theirs is an engagement without any pretence of sentiment, as I dare say you had occasion to guess, Archie, even during your short experience of Gerald Durant in Morteville. Miss Durant likes her cousin because she has never seen any one else in her life. Gerald marries her—"

"Because she is rich," interrupted Archie, quickly. "I know, and I repeat, I don't see why they ask me to be with them so much. If they are in love with each other, they cannot want strangers. If they are not—"

"If they are not, Archie?"

"Well, they certainly won't become so through having me in their company besides, it's much pleasanter at home, and there is plenty to be done in the garden, if you'll help me. I don't at all see why you and I should trouble ourselves to make society for the Durants, when we have the choice of remaining here alone by ourselves!"

But Bettina, who entered the room just then, on poor Mr Lovell's arm, stately as if she had been a bishop's wife, for the one o'clock dinner, saw the matter in a very different light. An invitation, a first invitation to Durant's Court to be refused! The

best neighbours they had: and showing such a friendly spirit—asking them already to the wedding—and everything! Some member of the family at all events should accept; and she had a very great mind to put on her mauve moiré and start, herself, as soon as luncheon was over: a threat that brought Archie, who shrank with nervous terror from the thought of Bettina and Gerald meeting, to instant, almost eager, submission. She would go; she would be agreeable to Lucia; would try, if she could, to behave like a young lady—not a boy; would accept any invitations they gave her: everything that Bettina wished—only, let her and Major Seton go alone. And then Mrs Lovell happily remembering that the doctor's wife had promised to call and talk over parish business that afternoon, the matter was settled; and at three o'clock Archie stood ready by Major Seton's side at the Rectory-gate, with Bettina still calling out to her through the parlour-window, to be pleasant to everybody, and to accept all overtures of intimacy that Lady Durant and her daughter might be good enough to make.

The coolest summer path from the Rectory to Durant's Court was a footway that led through a corner of the Ludbrooke woods, then, after half a mile or so of steep and sheltered lane, fell into one of the side alleys of the old Chase: and this was the path Major Seton chose for Archie now. She was in a tumult of wild spirits as soon as she got away out of Bettina's sight, and made the woods echo with her jokes and bursts of laughter as they walked along. But Ralph knew her well enough to detect a false ring in her voice, a bitterness very unlike her old self, under all her little jests, and his heart was pained for her exceedingly. More than ever the girl's beauty and grace, and fitful winning ways, had touched his fancy to-day: more than ever his reason bade him note how thorough, how consistent was her capacity for dissimulation: and more than ever he loved her! Loved her—so he strove to believe—with a love from which every selfish hope, every smaller jealousy, was absent. Whatever the nature of her feelings towards Gerald Durant: whether the last act in this part that she was playing should be comedy or tragedy: he, at least, would hold by her—blindly, unquestioningly! Not, perhaps, as a man would hold by the woman into whose hands he meant to

intrust his own honour, but rather as a father would hold faithful to an erring child, a child whom no fault, no guilt, could ever estrange from his affection.

"You laugh too much, Archie; it pains me to hear it. I don't think there is quite a true sound in your voice or in your laugh to-day."

They had just reached the point where Durant's Court was first visible among the distant trees, and Archie, in the middle of some wild childish jest or other, was laughing, a stranger would have said, with her whole heart, when Ralph spoke. She turned to him, and the laugh died in a moment: her lips began to quiver.

"I—I don't know what you mean, Major Seton. I never used to tire you by my nonsense once, I think!"

"It was all real then, Archie. If your voice had got its old sound I could listen to your laugh for ever."

"The old sound! How can one's voice remain the same always? Doesn't life change? isn't one changed oneself? I shall be eighteen in October. How can you expect me to be a child in anything?" Saying all this quickly, passionately, and with the same quiver yet about her lips.

"Well, you are not quite a child, of course, Archie," said Ralph, kindly; "but you are of an age to have a child's spirits—certainly not to need to force them as you do to-day."

"You think so? Major Seton, what do you know of my life and of my troubles—the things I have to make my heart heavy? Is our age measured by years? Bettina and papa are ten times lighter-hearted, both of them, than I."

"Poor little Archie! If I could help you I would, child—help you with my life—but you won't let me, you know. I am nothing to you now. Do you remember the old motto that I taught you, and made you hold to when you were little—the motto that you acted upon when you saved Tino from being punished for your sins? Of course you don't, though. How should you remember anything that happened all those years ago?"

"I remember it distinctly," said Archie; "a very nice motto it was—for me and Tino! but it would never fit into the lives of grown-up men and women—women especially: '*Fais ce que dois: advienne que pourra.*' A beautiful maxim! '*Fais ce que dois:*'

easy to follow if other people did the same; but they don't; and one's life is mixed up with other lives, and what we do comes from other people, not from ourselves. If each of us lived in a desert, your motto would be an admirable one; but we don't live in deserts—I don't, at least—and I can't do what is right, and I care a great deal—sometimes I am told my first duty is to care—for what follows. *Allez!*"

She snatched off a great head of foxglove from the hedge, and began plucking it to pieces as she walked; throwing away flower after flower with a certain restless gesture of the hand that Ralph remembered was always the sign of some unusual emotion in her when she was a child.

"And I can't even advise you, Archie, then?" Never had he admired her more than at this moment: her fresh lips playing at scepticism and sophistry; the scoffing, defiant look upon her soft child's face. Never had she more recalled to him the days when he believed that the germ of every fair and noble quality was latent in Archie Lovell's heart. "There is nothing you will let me do for you?"

"In the way of advice, nothing. Advice never did me any good: it never will. Now, if—if—" she hesitated an instant; then shot a quick glance up into Ralph's face, "I hate to say this, Major Seton, when I think of all you have done for us, but I have no one to go to but you—I asked Bettina in a roundabout way this morning, and she told me we had not five pounds in the house—if you could lend me some money, fifty pounds say, you would help me infinitely! help me, ah, so that I could never repay you while I live!" And she came close to him, and suddenly put up her hand, all in a tremble, on his arm.

The touch thrilled through every fibre of Ralph Seton's heart. "I wish you had asked me for anything else, Archie, by Heaven, I do! What do you want money for? Tell me everything you desire in the world, and let me—oh, child, let me have the foolish pleasure of giving it you—but money! You, at your age, to want money!" And for an instant the sickening suspicion that her father must have tutored her into asking this overcame him.

"Well, you have only to refuse me," said Archie, quietly; but her face blanched at the thought of his refusal. "It is not to

spend upon myself; it is not for anything I can tell papa about. I am in a great trouble—a trouble where only money can help me, and I thought perhaps you would have lent me some. I will speak of it no more. Ralph, dear Ralph!" half repentant, half cajoling, and looking up at him with eyes unused to denial, "you have sacrificed enough for us already, I am sure!"

And upon this Major Seton straightway did what many another stern, high-principled man would have done, perhaps, with a soft hand weighting his arm, blue eyes imploring to him through unshed tears—succumbed utterly; promised to write out a cheque for fifty pounds—a hundred pounds—whenever Archie wished; to ask her no question, direct or indirect, about the way in which it pleased her to spend it; but to stand—for this she pleaded to him wistfully—to stand by her and aid her in every difficulty of her life, now and always. Then he took her hand, and, raising it reverently, held it long—poor little trembling hand that it was—to his lips. This was part of his system, doubtless, for his folly's cure: part of his system for putting the girl away out of his heart.

They found Lucia and Gerald already out on the lawn, pretending, in a lover-like fashion, to play croquet, when they arrived. Miss Durant, in her little affable way, assigned Archie and Major Seton to be partners at once; and the match was soon going on as gaily as though no heart out of the four were burthened by fear or jealousy—as calmly as though no storm, which might for ever wreck the lives of all, were already dark upon the horizon! Won by the irresistible frankness of Gerald's manner, the hearty grasp of his hand when they met, Ralph Seton found it impossible, after the first five minutes were over, to treat him either with coldness or distrust. Indeed, as the day wore on, and as he marked Gerald's thoroughly unconcerned manner towards Archie, his devotion to Lucia; marked too—could he fail to mark?—the conscious blush that ever and anon rose upon Archie Lovell's face when, by chance, her eyes met his own; it began to dawn upon the mind of the old Moustache that a good many of his severest foregone resolutions were somewhat transcendental ones. Through folly or through accident, this girl and this man had once spent eight or ten hours of a summer's day—scarcely more than indifferent acquaintance spend at a pic-nic or a yachting party—to-

gether; and neither caring for the other, and the world happily knowing nothing of that foolish chance, each with honour would marry and be happy apart, some day look back and speak with calmness of that accidental half-liking of the past. Archie had spoken falsely to him in Morteville, certainly; ay—but how fair she looked, bare-headed beneath the cedar shade, the cool light playing on her white dress, her bright hair clustering round her neck, her slender figure girlishly, innocently free in every new attitude, as she flitted across the grass. She had been false—was false still. But something must ever be forgiven in what we love; and marvellously easy it would be, he thought, to forgive her anything! And with an instinctive, a growing consciousness of why Major Seton watched her so steadfastly, Archie, all her forced spirits gone, was soft, quiet, womanly, as she had never been till to-day: soft and womanly to an extent that occasionally gave Gerald's heart a very sore pang yet: and even made Lucia confess to him, aside, that, with training and attention, and care of her complexion, the rector's daughter might possibly yet become "nice-looking than otherwise."

When their match was over, Major Seton and Archie shamefully defeated, high tea—as dinner, if eaten cold or at an earlier hour than usual, must now be called—was served to them upon the lawn. Archie sat by Sir John Durant, charming him, as that sunny face and laugh of hers always charmed old people, and long before the meal was over had begun to confess to herself that the air of Durant's Court, the presence even of the lovers themselves, no longer stifled her. A welcome sense of peace and protection came over her as she looked at Sir John and Lady Durant, at the stately old house, the hemmed-in gardens, the grave grey-headed butler standing erect and impassive behind his master's chair. Impossible, she thought, that vulgar, noisy trouble, the scandal of a public exposure, could be coming near a place so sheltered, near people so separated from the outer world as these. What was there to prove that Captain Waters' story had a word of truth in it! Might he not himself have put that notice in the paper? Would such a man hesitate as to means where money was to be extorted? And she had been weak, cowardly enough to take all his threats at their full worth! Lucky that it had been out of

her power to send him off the money at once. She would make fullest confession, she thought, as she walked home with Ralph to-night; would throw herself upon his pity; ask him to save her from the possibility of Captain Waters' further persecution; and then—then bright vistas of a peaceful future floated, rose-coloured, before Archie's mind! Her father happy with his pictures, Bettina with the parish, and she and Ralph fast friends, not a shadow of distrust between them, and in time, perhaps, long after Gerald and Lucia were married—

At this point of her meditation—Ralph was watching her downcast face just then, thinking how pure, how childlike, how untainted by a touch of falsehood, that face was—one of the underservants of the Court came across the lawn from the house, and, beckoning the butler mysteriously aside, said a few words in his ear. The old man at first shook his head, as though protesting against the indecorum of the message, whatever it was, that had been delivered to him; then, after a minute's consultation, returned behind his master's chair, and bending low, told him, in a whisper, that a person from London desired to see him without delay—a person on most important business, of the name of Wickham.

The word, whispered though it was, fell full on Archie Lovell's ear. Another instant, and her face—that innocent face that Ralph was watching so tenderly—had grown white as ashes.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

FAREWELLS TO LUCIA.

Mr Wickham stood quietly waiting for the servant's return in the great hall of the Court; and as he waited he took a brief mental inventory of all the different objects by which he was surrounded. The dark groined roof—not used to shelter men of his particular class—the armour in which the Durants of old had tilted, and sometimes bled to death for honour; the coats of arms

upon the painted windows; the glimpse through the open door of the garden, lying peaceful in the rosy evening flush, and of the little party beneath the cedars, Mr Wickham took note of all: professionally, mechanically, with a view to possible contingencies, without any sense of triumph or of pity; simply as he would have taken note of the squalid furniture in that waterside tavern to which he had conducted Mrs Sherborne on the day succeeding Margaret Hall's death.

Sir John Durant would see him in a few minutes, the servant brought in word; Sir John was at present finishing dinner with some friends on the lawn, if the gentleman would walk into the library? So into the library, with his peculiar, stealthy, noiseless tread, the gentleman walked (taking more notes on his way); and there, upright, unmoved, just as it chanced under the mournful-eyed portrait of Sir Francis Durant—the cavalier who was wont to lay himself in his coffin in memory of the martyred king—stood and waited for the present master of the Court: the old man whose pride, whose name, it was his mission to bring lower than the pride, the name, of any Durant since the Conquest had ever yet been brought!

Sir John came in with his accustomed courteous, blandly-condescending air; seated himself by the open window, from whence he could still see Gerald at Lucia's side, and signed graciously to Mr Wickham that he might take a chair.

"You have come to see me on business, Mr ——?"

"Wickham, Sir John Durant. Inspector Wickham," put in the visitor, deferentially, and remaining standing still.

"Mr Wickham—ah, yes, I did not quite catch the name. Some communication from Conyers Brothers, of Lincoln's Inn, I suppose?"

Mr Wickham gave an apologetic half-cough, and raised the back of his hand to his mouth. "Mr Conyers was the party, I understand, Sir John Durant, who first opened your offer to our people, but my business is not connected with that in any way—payment of course never being made in these cases until the information sought for has been brought to proof. I have come down to-day on a mission of a remarkably grave nature, and—the circumstances being unusually delicate ones—it seems to me a

duty"—on the strength of addressing a baronet, Mr Wickham made his sentences as long and as inverted as he could—"a painful duty, Sir John Durant, to put you in possession of some of the leading facts my inquiries have brought to light before proceeding to execute it."

"Ah, yes, I'm much obliged to you for your attention, I am sure." And Sir John, always sleepy after dinner, gave a half-yawn as he spoke. "If you really *don't* think Conyers would have done as well? I have a great dislike to business, and—and all painful subjects, and I am sure I shall gladly pay the hundred pounds (something has been discovered you say?) to know that the thing is set at rest. It has been a very harassing occurrence to me, Mr Wickham, very." And Sir John drew out his spectacles, wiped them, adjusted them on his nose, and looked imploringly at his visitor, as much as to say, Pray be brief, my good Mr Wickham; you are an excellent person, no doubt, and have done everything that excellent persons of your class are usually paid to do in these matters, and I'm ready to glance at any distressing documents you may have with you, or sign you a cheque: anything to get rid of you, and of all other unpleasant subjects, as briefly as possible!" And Mr Wickham, no bad interpreter of expression, saw at a glance with what kind of human creature he had to deal. Durant's Court was not the only old house with an unsullied name and an ancestry dating back to William the Conqueror into which his professional duties had been the means of bringing him.

"I am sorry, Sir John Durant—ahem! very sorry—to say that my communication cannot be told in six words. This is a matter of no common importance, sir, and I think perhaps it would be as well to have a third party present during our conversation."

Sir John bowed resignedly. "Whatever you think necessary—only, really, if Conyers *could* have done it all—and another person present, you say! Now is that necessary, Mr Wickham? It was my duty of course to see that these inquiries were made—a very good girl, poor thing! the Sherbornes most respected tenants of ours for generations past—and it has been your duty to make them—but why should we pain another person by compelling him to listen to any of the harrowing details you have collected? Why should we, Mr Wickham?"

"Well, Sir John Durant," answered Mr Wickham, with a little abrupt shift from his upright posture. "You being, as I hear, a magistrate, don't need to be told that there's a form in all these things—a form that it's just as well to attend to. I'm placed by my duty in a position where it's best for all parties to be plain spoken, and I hope you'll say hereafter I conducted everything honourable and above-board. Mr Gerald Durant is, I believe, staying in this house? Well, I understood so—I understood so—and if I may make so free as to offer an opinion, I should say that Mr Gerald Durant is the gentleman who ought to be present at our conversation."

"Dear me—well, now, I cannot see that!" cried Sir John. "What earthly difference can it make whether two people or one has to bore himself—I beg your pardon, to go through all this very distressing business?—however, of course you know best. May I ask you to have the goodness to touch that bell?—thank you, I have been rather helpless, Mr Wickham, since my last attack of gout, and I feel every change in the weather. We are going to have rain now, I'm afraid. The harvest has been getting on very well hitherto." Making these little remarks in the affably familiar tone he always employed towards his inferiors. "A great deal is in round us already, and we are not generally an early county."

Mr Wickham was deferentially interested. Being a Londoner himself, he was not much of a hand at such things, but seemed to think the crops looked forward, certainly, as he came down by the train. After this, a servant having meanwhile entered and been told to request Mr Gerald Durant's presence in the library, there was a pause. Sir John helped himself to a pinch of snuff from his gold snuff-box, and turned his face again towards the window (very handsome the kindly weak old face looked in the sinking light); Mr Wickham stood respectfully in the background still: the hard features immovable, expressionless as ever: the keen eyes adding more and more items to that professional inventory which his unresting brain was never wearied of drawing out. In five or six minutes' time Gerald Durant entered the room.

"Here is my nephew, Mr Gerald Durant," said Sir John. "Gerald, this is Mr Wickham—Inspector Wickham, you know,

whom Conyers got to inquire about poor Maggie Hall, and we thought you might as well be present to hear how it is all settled. I wrote to Conyers a week or two back—didn't I tell you?—offering a reward if anything could be discovered about the way she came by her death, poor soul, and—"

But the old man's hazy talk was brought to a sudden stop before the look of Gerald's face. He had, I have said before, a complexion which flushed and faded like a girl's under any strong emotion; at this moment the blood rushed violently to his temples, then ebbed away and left him a pale ashen hue, very painful to witness. "You—you offered a reward, sir!" he exclaimed, his voice shaken with agitation; for now that the police had been at work, could he doubt *what* story he had been summoned here to listen to? could he doubt that the shame of Robert Dennison's marriage—the treble shame of his having deserted his wife, was to become public? "No, you did not tell me of this before. I wish to heaven you had!" he added bitterly.

Up to this moment he had scarcely noticed Wickham, who was still keeping respectfully aloof in the background; as he turned impatiently from his uncle now, his eyes fell full upon the detective's face, and then Mr Wickham came half a step forward, and after giving another of his small coughs of apology spoke:

"My duty is a painful one, Mr Gerald Durant, but I wish to discharge it as delicately and as fairly as possible, and I warn you, sir, that anything you say now may hereafter be brought up to your detriment. I have no wish—there is no necessity," he added with emphasis, "for me to employ subterfuge of any kind. I am an officer of detective police. I have been employed by the authorities to investigate the circumstances connected with Margaret Hall's death, on the second instant, and I warn you again, Mr Durant, that anything you now say may hereafter be made use of to your disadvantage."

"And why the deuce, sir, should we require this, or any other warning of yours?" cried Gerald, hotly. "Sir John Durant has offered a sum of money for the discovery of certain circumstances. You, it appears, have discovered them, and have come to claim your reward. What can we possibly have to say at all in such a

matter? You have to speak, and we to listen, I think, sir." And drawing up a chair, Gerald took his place at Sir John Durant's side. Only too clearly he foresaw the cruel blow the chivalrous old man was about to receive; and his blood rose at the thought that already a man like this was treating them half with pity; warning them to say nothing that could hereafter be used against themselves! They, the Durants of Durant, warned not to betray their complicity with the guilty husband and betrayer—their own flesh and blood—of Margaret Hall the dairy-maid!

"I made use of a form only," said Wickham, suavely—accurately calculating, meanwhile, the precise angle which Gerald occupied between the window and the spot where he himself stood. "There is, as Mr Gerald Durant says, no necessity for the warning in this particular instance, but there are formulas that we are instructed to follow in every case of ar—of criminal procedure, and I adhered to duty in giving it. I have now, Sir John Durant, to lay before you briefly the results of my search in this matter. If they lead to a most unlooked-for conclusion, if they fix the guilt upon parties the least suspected by yourself, you will, I hope, be in some measure prepared for the shock. I have been placed in positions of this kind before—often before," said Mr Wickham, with honourable pride; "and I have always found, if I may be excused the remark, that the higher born a gentleman is the better he bears any painful or unexpected disclosure; even a disclosure," lowering and concentrating his voice, and moving a stealthy step or two in advance, "that may darkly affect his honour and the honour of his family."

Gerald passed his hand with irrepressible impatience across his face: old Sir John gave a puzzled benign look of inquiry at Wickham.

"This extreme delicacy does you credit, Mr Wickham, still I cannot but think you over-estimate our interest in the case. The girl was a good girl, poor thing! the servant of one of my tenant-farmers, you understand—nothing more."

Mr Wickham bowed; and looking down, traced out, for a second or two, one of the patterns on the carpet with his foot. He felt as assured now of the old man's utter ignorance as of Gerald's guilt, and it seemed to him that the shortest way of

finishing what he had come to accomplish would be the most merciful; he also wanted to return by the seven-forty train to London.

"On the night of the second instant, Sir John Durant"—taking a note-book from his pocket, and occasionally glancing at it, but more for form's sake than because his memory required artificial aid as he spoke—"the body of a woman was, as you know, found in the Thames, a little below London Bridge. From the first, and although nothing material was brought to light at the inquest, some suspicions of foul play were entertained among our people, and I was intrusted with the further management of the case. It has proved as difficult a one, sir, as was ever worked; but no stone has been left unturned—although I say so—in working it; and bit by bit, as I am about to show, every portion of the requisite evidence has come into my hands. The story, shortly put, comes to this: Margaret Hall, seven months ago, eloped from her employer's house, here in Staffordshire, with a gentleman (whom at present I need not name), and, to the best of my belief, though of this I have no absolute proof, became his wife." Gerald gave a sigh of relief. Discovery had not, after all, gone so far, perhaps, as he had dreaded. "On the second of August, Sir John Durant, this gentleman returned from France, accompanied by a lady—we may say, for shortness, by his wife—and arrived with her in town, as I have evidence to show, at about eight o'clock in the evening. They came direct from Morteville-sur-Mer to London, and the name of the excursion steamer that brought them was the Lord of the Isles. A man called Randall, better known among our people by the name of Waters, saw them on board together from the Calais pier; the gentleman's own servant, reluctantly, as is natural, is witness to the same; and, lastly, a lady who was one of their fellow-passengers swears to a travelling cloak she lent the young woman in the course of the voyage, and which, in the hurry of landing, or some other cause, was not returned to its owner. Well, sir, the gentleman (whom at present I need not call by name) was next seen with his companion by one of our officers on London Bridge, at a few minutes before ten o'clock that night; and here, as throughout, not a shadow of doubt rests upon the accuracy of the evidence, the officer, under my directions, having

watched the gentleman at his town lodgings, not three days ago, and sworn positively to his identity. The girl was at this time dressed, it is remembered, in a scarlet travelling cloak; the gentleman was standing, no hat on, and his coat torn, by her side. Whether a quarrel had taken place between them already is a matter of surmise. There had been a disturbance shortly before on the bridge, which, it is suggested, may account for the state of the gentleman's dress. Something unusual, at all events, about their appearance and manner made the officer watch them narrowly before proceeding on his beat. It was now, you will remark, near upon ten o'clock; a quarter of an hour only before the time when a woman's shriek was heard, and a body seen to fall from the bridge. An hour or so later, the gentleman went alone to the house of a relation, excited in manner, and disordered in his dress, and when joked with about his appearance, volunteered the singular statement that he had seen the ghost of an old friend's face—'the ghost of a Staffordshire face'—on London Bridge that night. Some hours afterwards the body of a female was found drowned in the river, dressed in the scarlet cloak since identified, a handkerchief marked with initials corresponding to the name of the suspected party in her breast. The body was recognized and sworn to by Martha Sherborne, on the afternoon of the inquest, as that of her late dairy servant, Margaret Hall." And here Mr Wickham paused.

"And what does all this prove?" cried Sir John, a nervous tremor in his voice. "I am a magistrate, Mr Wickham, I understand law myself, and I don't see that these facts, supposing them all to be established, go to prove that the girl came by her death unfairly. If they point to anything, it is to what we have suspected from the first—suicide."

"That is a question for the lawyers," answered Wickham, with excessive gravity. "I make no accusation, I seek to establish nothing. My duty has been to search for facts alone. These facts having been considered conclusive, a warrant has been granted for the apprehension of the person who was Margaret Hall's companion on the night of her death, and my duty here is to carry that warrant into effect."

"Here!" exclaimed old Sir John, a deep red flushing over his

face as he got up slowly from his chair. "You are misinformed, Mr Wickham, or you are carrying some mistaken sense of duty too far. What apprehension can you possibly have to execute in my house?"

"I have to arrest the person of Margaret Hall's companion," said Wickham, with increasing firmness, and producing a paper from his pocket. "You are a magistrate, Sir John Durant, and I look to you to help rather than hinder me in my duty—painful though it may be?"

"And that person?" faltered Sir John, with whitening lips, as a new and awful suspicion overcame him.

"That person," answered Wickham, "is now, I regret to say, before you. Mr Durant," coming across the room in a second, and laying a heavy hand on Gerald's shoulder, "I arrest you on the charge of having caused, or been party to, the death of Margaret Hall, on the night of August the second. You must consider yourself my prisoner, sir, and you will be pleased to accompany me back to London by the seven-forty train to-night."

Gerald had been sitting till this minute with his hands tightly pressed across his eyes. He started to his feet in a second at Wickham's touch, and as his hand dropped from his face, both of the men who were watching him felt literally startled by the calmness of its expression. I imagine most innocent men or women would look to the full as guilty as really criminal ones in the first stunned moment of an unjust accusation; guilty or innocent, the majority of human cheeks would certainly blanch—the majority of human nerves falter at such a moment as this! But Gerald Durant's face kept just as calm as it had been half an hour before, when he was whispering soft nothings to Lucia under the cedar-trees on the lawn. "Blood tells," thought Wickham, proud of the verification of his theory. "Evidence enough against him to hang a bishop, and he ups after his arrest, as cool as a cucumber, and with a face like this. Fine family—fine spirit! Pleasure to a man to have his duty lie with real gentlemen who can act as such!" And possibly Mr Wickham was right. Possibly it *was* his blood, the inherited instincts of a gentle race, that upheld Gerald at this moment. Robert Dennison, the manufacturer's son, could confront personal danger with the strength, the

sheer animal courage, of a lion. Gerald could do more: he could confront disgrace sooner than betray a trust: could confront it with the carelessness of a cavalier dying for his worthless king, the grace of a French marquis arranging his necktie, and smiling adieux to his friends, upon his way to the tumbril! As Wickham told his story—from the moment when the word Morteville first turned suspicion aside from Robert to the last—Gerald had followed him calmly and minutely, his quick imagination supplying a hundred links that in Wickham's purposely short account were wanting; and, long before the heavy hand was laid upon his shoulder, had realized the position in which he stood, the very plain and straightforward path that lay before him. To whatever pass this extraordinary chain of accidents might lead, a double trust must, he felt, seal his lips from speaking one solitary word of self-defence. By disclosing what he knew of Robert's marriage, he might possibly clear himself—and present to the world the chivalrous spectacle of a Durant striving to shift danger from his own shoulders to that of another member of his family. By bringing forward Archie Lovell he could, for very certain, reduce the whole accusation to an absurdity: save his own at the price of a woman's reputation. And the temptation, the conflict, that might have assailed many a man, equally honest, but of different race, never really for a moment came near Gerald Durant. He was placed awkwardly—simply that: and before his uncle, and before this man whose heavy hand was on his shoulder alike, must give not a sign, say not a word, that could by possibility criminate the two persons his honour bade him shield. How things would probably end as regarded himself was a speculation he did not enter upon. To be the hero of a melodrama might yield him, if the play did not last too long, a new emotion or two at all events; and as to coming to definite grief—well, as he had told Robert, no one ever finally does that in these days off the boards of the Adelphi.

"Seven-forty;" taking out his watch, quietly. "I think it would be rather a mistake to go by that, Mr Wickham. The seven-forty is a slow train. If we go by the mail, which leaves Hatton at eight, we shall get to town an hour earlier, and I shall be able to have a cup of coffee and a cigar—you want something too, perhaps, after your journey?—before we start."

For about the first time in his long official experience Mr Wickham felt actually taken aback by his prisoner's unconcerned and courteous manner. He required no refreshment for himself, but Mr Durant was doubtless right; the mail would be the best train for them to go by, and he wished to make everything comfortable, and let Mr Durant take leave of his friends—though generally best avoided—before they left.

Then Gerald turned to his uncle who was standing by, too stunned as yet to speak, and with his fine old face white to the very lips with agitation. "A ridiculous mistake, sir, is it not? but four-and-twenty hours will set it all to rights. You can come up to-morrow and we'll see Conyers together, and for to-night I think it would be wise to keep silence about it in the house. Say I have had to go up to town on business, nothing more."

"But—the thing is monstrous!" exclaimed Sir John, recovering his breath at last. "You—Gerald accused of . . . why, good God!" he broke out passionately, the very suspicion is a disgrace! Explain it away at once—explain at once to this officer how he is mistaken—say what you were doing at the time when the woman came by her death. The thing is a joke, of course it will prove to be a joke—you take it in the right way, Gerald—but don't let it be carried any further. If this officer's duty is to take you to London, you must of course go; but show at once before him, and before me, the ludicrous impossibility of your even being mixed up in such a charge." And with very poor success the old man tried to laugh, then turned abruptly aside and hid away his face between his hands.

"If I was to give an opinion," put in Mr Wickham with extreme politeness, "I should say that the less Mr Gerald Durant states about himself before me just now the better. If a gentleman, circumstanced as Mr Durant is, was as innocent as the babe unborn, and as able to prove an alibi as I am to prove I am standing here, Sir John Durant, I should observe to a gentleman so circumstanced, 'the less you say before me, except in the ways of general conversation, the better.' These things are forms, certainly," added Mr Wickham, "but forms are forms—and justice is justice—and what I say to Mr Gerald Durant is that every word

he makes use of now it will be my duty to bring up against him in the course of examination hereafter."

"And you are quite right, Mr Wickham," said Gerald quickly. "I see now why you warned me before not to speak. The arrest itself is palpably absurd, but you have performed your part in it with honesty. You will have no objection, I suppose, to my speaking a few words in private to my uncle?"

"None in life, Mr Durant, none in life. I wish to put you and all the family to no more illconvenience than necessary." And having previously satisfied himself as to the height of the window from the ground, Mr Wickham retired to the door, turned aside, and took out his note-book; and Gerald was left to whisper whatever counsel or consolation he could find to give to his uncle.

He said very few words, and all with a smile upon his face, all with a manner of calm, of thorough assurance as to the whole thing being an absurd and insignificant kind of practical joke. "You will come up to-morrow morning, sir, bring Seton with you if he will come, and see Conyers at once, though I hardly think it likely we shall want a lawyer's help at all. For the present the best way is for you to return quietly to the party in the garden, and let nothing whatever be known in the house about my arrest. If Lucia and her mother insist upon having suspicions, let them think I am in one of my usual difficulties about money. Women are not generally very difficult to blind in such matters. I won't even see Lucia before I go, sir; I couldn't, poor child! I'll see that little friend of hers, Miss Lovell—girls are the best ambassadors in each other's affairs—and intrust her with my farewells, if you can contrive to let me speak to her here alone? Lucky I left that rascal, Bennett, in town; he can bring my things from my lodgings to-morrow, supposing, which is very unlikely, that I am to be kept in durance over another day."

"And you won't see Lucia before you go, Gerald? Isn't this an over-delicacy of feeling; won't the child herself think it hard?"

"I *could* not see her," said Gerald, hastily, and turning his face away from his uncle's eyes. "Can't you understand, sir, that I would not have her, of all others, look upon me in such company

as this?" glancing for a second towards Mr Wickham's immovable figure. "When everything is over, Lucia and I will laugh at it all together, but now—no, I could not see my poor little cousin now! I'll send my farewells to her, as I said, by the parson's daughter, if you can manage for me to speak to her here alone,—afterwards, when I have had a cup of coffee, I can just get quietly away with my friend here, and later in the evening you will tell them all that I am gone."

He stretched out his hand, and poor Sir John, too stupified by the suddenness of all that had happened to do more than obey, took and held it silently within his own: then, with a heavy heart (Mr Wickham opening the door for him as he passed) the old man stole out into the garden, and after parrying the questions of Lady Durant and Lucia as to the cause of Gerald's absence, made some excuse for asking the rector's daughter to walk with him towards the house. Five minutes later, with sinking limbs, with her breath coming awfully, guiltily fast, Archie Lovell entered the library, where Gerald, a cup of coffee in his hand, stood waiting for her in the embrasure of the farthest window; Mr Wickham upright and motionless, but keeping stealthy watch over every movement his prisoner made, at his post still beside the door.

The poor little girl began to cross the room with faltering uncertain steps, and Gerald, seeing her hesitation, came forward kindly, took her hand in his, and led her to the window, where he had been standing. All coldness, all small animosity towards Archie had died in his heart during the moment when he first realized the new position in which they stood to each other, the danger into which through his agency she was about to be brought. Miss Lovell, the coquette, whose blue eyes, whose clasped hands, had cost his vanity so dear, was gone: and in her place stood Archie Wilson—the child who had chattered to him in the moonlight, the bright-haired little queen of the Morteville ball, the girl whose fair fame, unless he stood staunch to her now, might, through his fault and for ever, be forfeited. For the first time in his life he felt as simply, frankly generous towards a woman as he would have felt had she been a man. Neither a prey to be run down nor a toy to be forgotten (Gerald's broad classification generally), did Archie seem to him now; but a friend, a comrade

—the *bon garçon* participator in a madcap freak, of which he, as the guiltier of the two, must bear the punishment.

"Archie, how kind of you! but I thought you would come. You were always kind to me—kinder far than I deserved!"

He spoke to her just in the tone of their happy Morteville intimacy; as though their last cold meeting, as though his engagement to Lucia, had never been; and every pulse of Archie's heart vibrated at his voice. "I don't know what great kindness there is in walking a hundred yards, Mr Durant. Your uncle told me you were called away on business and wanted to speak to me about Lucia, and I came."

"Well, it is not of Lucia that I want to speak, but of myself. Would you have come to me as quickly, I wonder, if you had known that?"

"Of course I would. I am more interested a hundred times in you than I am, or ever shall be, in Lucia. You ought to know that, I think. What—what is this that you are going to say to me, Mr Durant?"

Dim though the light was, Gerald could note the ebbing colour on Archie Lovell's face; could note the quick-drawn breath, the quiver of that sensitive fine-cut mouth; and, as if by inspiration, there flashed a suspicion singularly near the truth across his mind. "You have no idea already of what I am going to say, Archie? The time has come, you know, when you and I must keep no more secrets from each other."

"I—how should I? I don't understand you!" But the words came indistinct and broken from her lips. "How is it possible that I can tell what you are going to say to me?"

"Archie," said Gerald, earnestly, "take my advice, and speak to me more openly. We shall not have ten minutes' conversation together at most, and on these ten minutes a great deal of my life and of yours may hang, I fancy. Look upon me as a friend—a brother, if you like the word better—and be frank! In short, be Archie Wilson again—Archie Wilson in the days before she had learnt to be wise!"

She stood for a minute or more speechless, motionless, and the little hand that Gerald till now had forgotten to relinquish seemed to turn to ice within his own: at last, with a sort of sob—a sob

that made Mr Wickham in his distant corner look up one instant from his note-book, the truth came out. "I know everything, Mr Durant," she whispered. "I was too great a coward to speak when I might have warned you, but I know everything! Captain Waters told me, and I have promised to pay him to be silent. I am an impostor, everything that is vilest, but it was for papa's sake and . . . Ah, Mr Durant, I think the shame would kill me if I had to come forward, as Captain Waters said, and tell before a judge and a court full of men how I went with you to London!" And then, in broken whispers—the sweet face wet with tears not six inches from Gerald's—she made fullest confession of all that Waters had told her, and of her own vileness, so she called it, in determining to keep her own counsel at whatever cost.

Gerald's lips had grown set and stern long before she finished. "The scoundrel!" he muttered between his teeth; "the double-dyed infernal scoundrel! Archie, my poor little friend, how glad I am that you have had courage to tell me all this. You shall never be troubled with Captain Waters any more. He frightened you for nothing, Archie, believe me. I am in a difficult position, the victim rather of a most ridiculous mistake, but there is no more chance of your name being brought forward in any way than of Lucia's. Keep perfectly quiet—it was this I sent for you to say; keep quiet whatever you are told or may fear, and no harm can possibly come near you, I swear it."

"And if—if my evidence is all that can prove you to be innocent?" she faltered, looking at him with dilated, frightened eyes, as Captain Waters' words came back to her recollection.

"Your evidence!" Gerald laughed, lightly. "Why, one would think you were a Lord Chancellor at least, to hear all the fine legal words you use! It will not be a question of giving evidence at all. I have to go up to London to-night with the gentleman you see standing there, and to-morrow or next day the whole mistake will be cleared up."

"And if it is not? if nothing can clear you unless I do come forward and speak? I am not a child, Mr Durant; I have grown old and wise during the last few weeks," she added, with unconscious sadness, "and if they accuse you of having been present when this woman died, of course I *could* help you by telling how

we gave her the cloak, for I am beginning to connect all these things clearly now, and how Captain Waters saw us together at Calais on board the steamer, and—"

"Archie," interrupted Gerald, gravely, "if the mistake is harder to prove than I think now, if I am brought into a position of absolute danger—the most improbable occurrence in the world—and want you to speak, I will send word to you to come. Seton will be with me in town most likely, and I will send him down to you—nay, don't misunderstand me," for at the mention of Ralph she had turned from him with a start, "neither Seton nor any other human being shall ever know what at present is a secret between ourselves. If I want you, Seton will bring you this simple message, 'Come.' If I do not, you will have no message from me at all. Now, I think we understand each other."

"And Captain Waters?" she asked. "I must keep my word, and send him the money."

"You must do nothing of the kind," interrupted Gerald, promptly. "You must hold no written communication whatsoever with Captain Waters. I will arrange with the gentleman—pay him the price he asks, and undertake that you, at least, shall never be troubled with him again. You have not forgotten his address, I hope?"

No, she had not forgotten it: forgotten? had one word he told her been ever really absent from her thoughts since yesterday? "Captain Waters, 50, Cranbourne Street, Leicester Square." Gerald took out a card and wrote this address down, leaning forward through the open window to catch whatever light still lingered as he did so, and Mr Wickham, looking round quickly, remarked—in a voice which seemed, although he stood twenty feet at least away, to whisper awfully, mysteriously close to Archie's ear—that he believed the time was getting on.

"I am ready for you," said Gerald, cheerily; then in a lower tone, "Good-bye, Archie," turning so that he sheltered the girl's shrinking figure from Wickham's sight. "Let me have your hand—so!" and he carried it to his lips, for the second, the last time in his life. "If things had gone differently, I think you might have grown to like me in time, and I—well, I could have loved you better than I have ever loved or shall love any woman while

I live. The injury I did you was unintentional, you believe that, Archie? and the temptation great! Don't you recollect how blue the sea was that day, and how one accident after another seemed fated to fall upon us, and how pleasant it was to be together? You forgive me?"

She could only clasp his hand closely for answer.

"Very well, then. We shall be fast friends still, whatever happens. Recollect all I have told you about keeping quiet and not troubling yourself on my account, and—let me see, is there anything more for us to say? Well, I've got your glove, and, don't be angry, but I shall kiss it sometimes still, Archie, and think of the night I stole it from you. Do you remember our quarrel, and how bright the moon shone in as we danced that last waltz, and made friends again? You mustn't quite forget the Morteville days, you know; and however things turn out, Archie, you must try to think of me kindly! And now," with one long last look into her face, "God bless you, dear!"

This was how Mr Durant sent his farewells to Lucia.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

"FAIS CE QUE DOIS!"

In painful, visible constraint, not trusting herself to speak of Gerald or of the interview that she had had with him, Archie Lovell walked home that night by Ralph's side. Early next morning Major Seton, without calling at the Rectory, left home for London; and by evening of the same day Bettina had already obtained information, from the most authentic village sources, as to the cause of Mr Durant's departure; the profession of the mysterious man in plain clothes who had been seen to accompany him into a first-class railway carriage at the Hatton station.

These rumours, whispered at first, and contradicted as soon as whispered, were spoken next day above the breath, and allowed to pass. On the following morning a short paragraph in the

London papers told the Staffordshire world how Mr Durant had already appeared before the magistrate on the charge of being accessory to the death of Margaret Hall; and then every one rushed away to leave cards and inquiries for poor dear Lady Durant; and remembered how they always thought Gerald had a vile trick of contracting his eyebrows, and a most sinister expression at times about the corners of his mouth!

And up to the evening of the fourth day from that of his arrest, Archie Lovell heard no more than the vague contradictory reports of the village gossips as to how the case was going on. She called with her stepmother at the Court, ostensibly to inquire for Sir John, who had been seized with an attack of gout on the morning he was to have accompanied Seton to London, and had not left his room since. She listened while Bettina talked by the hour together of Gerald; the likelihood, considering his character, of his guilt; the disgrace to the Durants that must ensue; and the number of fine old families that she, Bettina, had seen Providence —wisely, perhaps—consign to ruin during her life. She helped her father to arrange his cabinets and hang his pictures; went on working at her garden; ate her meals; rose in the morning, and went to bed as usual. Did she suffer? She hardly knew herself. The time went awfully, deathfully slow; her heart beat thick and fast at every chance sound, every strange voice she heard; a dull, heavy weight was never absent from her brain. This was as much as Archie could have told of her own condition. Poor Mr Lovell, observing her heavy eyes and pallid cheeks, hoped, measles being about in the village, that the child was not going to take that disorder a second time: and Bettina—well, Bettina, knowing all she did concerning the past, was not without a suspicion that Archie "fretted" about Gerald still, and in her own innermost soul felt not unreasonably grieved over the young man's misfortunes. It was a terrible blow for the Durants, of course, but very lucky it all came out before the marriage instead of after; and really if he *had* had anything to do with the young woman's death, it would be impious to wish him to escape altogether from justice. The Durants of Durant would be just as much their neighbours without him as with him; and Archie's secret of a vast deal less consequence. Not, poor young man, that she

wished the very worst to come to him: but an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth were the words of Scripture; and Bettina had never seen any particular good come of your Colensos and other softeners-away of Holy Writ, as yet.

On the evening of August the 20th, four days after that of Gerald's arrest, Major Seton suddenly made his appearance at the Rectory. The Lovells were just at tea in their pleasant myrtle-scented little parlour, the amber sunset streaming in cheerfully through the open casement, when he was ushered in: Mr Lovell with a manuscript book beside him on the table; Bettina chattering in high spirits as she poured out the tea; Archie in a pale muslin dress, her hair shining, a flower in her waist-belt, a goodly pile of seed-cake and fruit upon her plate. Ralph Seton's heart swelled with a feeling that was almost disgust as he looked at her. Her tear-stained cheeks, her silence, her constraint upon the night of Gerald's arrest, had made him feel—all too keenly then!—that a matter of no common interest had been discussed between them during their parting interview. The fact of her never reminding him again of the money she had wished to borrow, showed, he thought, some serious preoccupation of mind, some remorse, some sympathy at least with Gerald in his danger; and during his journey down Ralph had pictured to himself continually the sorrowful face, the eyes haunted by self-reproach, that would greet him when he reached the Rectory. He saw, instead, a peaceful family group; a girl, even in such a pass as this, too frivolous (and frivolity in a woman was, to Ralph, the one unpardonable sin) to forget so much as the flower at her own dainty waist! her blue eyes as untroubled, her facile smile as sweet, as on that day when—Gerald out of sight and out of mind—she waved her adieux to himself at the Morteville pier: the day when he had the excessive wisdom first to resolve upon putting her away out of his heart!

Very grim and stern, the old Moustache took a chair on the side of the table next to Mr Lovell, and away from Archie, and curtly declining Bettina's offer of tea, brought the conversation round, without an attempt at softening or preamble, to Gerald Durant. "You have all of you heard the truth by this time," he said, addressing himself ostensibly to Mrs Lovell, "and nothing

can be gained by treating the thing as a secret any longer. Gerald Durant comes up for his final examination to-morrow. They have brought the poor fellow twice before the magistrate already, and each time he has been remanded. To-morrow will settle it."

"And you think he will be found guilty?" cried Bettina, opening her eyes wide. "Dear, dear, now, Major Seton, *do* you think he will be really condemned?"

"Condemned to as much as a magistrate can condemn, most certainly," was Ralph's answer. "Condemned to an imprisonment which, however it may hereafter end, will effectually blacken his hopes, his prospects, his whole future life. By this time to-morrow Gerald Durant will, in all human probability, be committed to take his trial for the wilful murder of Margaret Hall. He has the best lawyers in London to help him, and as far as the preliminary examination goes, they all confess that the evidence against him is simply overwhelming. It is circumstantial, all of it," he went on, turning to Mr Lovell, "but none the less crushing for that. Nothing but the unexpected proving of an alibi at the eleventh hour can save Gerald Durant now."

"And how does he take it?" asked Mr Lovell, whose calm interest in other persons' concerns always savoured rather of æsthetic than of common-place human curiosity. "The situation of an innocent man awaiting an unjust doom is one of the deepest dramatic interest, yet I suspect most writers in treating it take their stand on a somewhat too transcendental ground. Now this Mr—Durant, to be sure, the same name as the people at the Court—is, I dare say, not at all in the inflamed heroic state of mind that the majority of dramatists and poets would, under such circumstances, paint?"

"He is," answered Ralph, purposely speaking slow and distinct so as to give his words a chance of sinking even on the "frivolous" heart of Archie Lovell, "more frankly, unaffectedly cheerful than I ever thought to see any man in such a position. Not indifferent to what to-morrow may bring—poor lad! for he thinks of those who will suffer by his disgrace—but as calmly ready to meet it as the men of his race have always been to meet danger. Until I looked at Gerald Durant's face in prison I don't think I ever rightly understood the meaning of the word 'loyalty.'"

Bettina sighed heavily as she raised her tea-cup to her lips. "Let us hope all things," she murmured, "even while we fear the worst. Let us hope that, as in the case of Jeroboam, hardened impenitence is not being added to the weight of the young man's sins."

"I think not, Mrs Lovell," said Ralph, with cold emphasis; "Gerald Durant is, *I know*, as innocent of the monstrous charge brought against him as I am. He had not seen Margaret Hall for months; he had no interest in her death; he was not on London Bridge at the moment when her death took place. A chain of unhappy accidents has, I believe, so woven itself around him, that he is not able to bring forward evidence in his own favour without betraying the confidence of another person; and this poor Gerald would no more do than one of his Jacobite ancestors would have saved himself by wishing life to King George upon the scaffold."

"Well, then, he is a fine fellow," exclaimed Mr Lovell, with animation; "and I should like to shake his hand. It is not often now that one comes across a trait of the Bayard-like, chivalrous feeling of old days. What manner of man can he be, though, who will accept his safety at such a price? Archie, are you listening? This friend of Seton's is ready, like one of the knights of old, to brave his own disgrace, sooner than betray a trust reposed in him . . . nay, but the story is too much for you, little one! Look at her face, Ralph—she is always so—any story of high resolve, or courage, is always too much for Archie's heart."

She was of an awful, greyish pallor, a pallor that extended to her lips and throat, and her eyes were fixed with a yearning, eager expression, on her father's face. "It is not too much for me at all, papa," bringing out each syllable with a painful, visible effort. "I know I am pale—I can't help it—I turn so always when I hear of things that move me. Papa, you would like to shake Gerald Durant's hand, you say? Would you like to shake the hand of the person he is seeking to screen? I mean if—if that person voluntarily accepts his safety."

"No, Archie," said Mr Lovell, half-smiling at her eagerness. "I would no more care to shake his hand or to hold fellowship with him than you would. Cowardice is the one thing (strange that it should be so, Seton! 'tis the most natural of our vices)

that puts a man—or woman, either, for the matter of that—for ever out of the reach of my sympathy."

Then, after an aside from Bettina as to "cowardice being one thing, my poor Frederick, and common worldly prudence another," Major Seton suffered the conversation to go into a fresh channel: and in a few minutes Archie rose and stole out alone, her father stopping her to kiss her cheek and her hand as she passed, to the garden.

Cool, sweet, silent almost to mournfulness, was the August evening at that half-hour after sunset: the sky of opal paleness, save where one mighty rose-flush stained the west; a solitary planet shining faint above the pure horizon; the light on russet woods and yellow cornfields slowly dying, through a thousand gradations of fleeting colour, into the exquisite sombre purple of the night. With a feeling almost of loathing at the sight of all that smiling golden calm, Archie walked away to the part of the garden farthest from the house; and there seating herself wearily upon the low stone wall that formed the boundary of the little orchard, strove to steady the beatings of her feverish heart; to collect her thoughts; to reason; to resolve.

Earnestly, with her very might, she strove; and, instead of obeying her, her heart throbbed on more hotly, her thoughts refused to concentrate themselves, her senses took note, with intense, with sickening acuteness, of every outward object by which she was surrounded: the sweet smell of a neighbouring bed of kitchen-herbs; the ridiculous tumult the grasshoppers were making in the orchard; the redness of the apples on one particular bough that overhung the wall. When she had remained thus five minutes, or an hour, she knew not which—there are conditions of the body under which all these arbitrary divisions of time exist for us no more than time itself exists for a man who dreams—a measured step she knew came along the gravel path. She started up nervously, and turning round, found Ralph Seton standing close beside her. Oldened and worn her face seemed to him now that he saw it in the broad evening light; the fair young forehead lined and heavy; the cheeks sunken; a deep shade round the eyes, giving their blue an almost unnatural lustre. "Major Seton," she exclaimed, abruptly, "explain the meaning of the word alibi to me. I have been told once, but I forget."

"An alibi consists in proving the presence of an accused man in some other place than that where his supposed crime was committed, Archie. An alibi, as I told your father, is all we can look to now for saving Gerald Durant to-morrow."

"Have you seen him to-day?"

"I have. I saw him not an hour before I left London this afternoon."

"And he told you that there was some person whose evidence could yet save him? He told you there was some person whose secret he was determined never to betray?"

"No, Archie, he did not. I believe, nay, I know, that this is the case; and I urged upon him—I speak to you frankly—I urged upon him that it was his duty to neglect no means of proving his own innocence "

"Go on," she exclaimed, breathlessly. "Why do you hesitate? He answered—"

"By laughing at the very idea of the generosity I imputed to him," replied Ralph. "Said that I might be quite sure he would take better care of himself than of anybody else; that—while he trusted implicitly in his innocence making itself felt in the end—an alibi was the one thing it was not in his power to prove. At the very time when it was necessary to account for himself he was driving about London in a hansom, the number of which he had not even looked at, and—"

"And at what hour does his trial take place?" interrupted Archie, shortly, and in a hard, unmodulated voice. "The trial to-morrow, I mean?"

"The examination—it is not a trial yet—is to begin at ten o'clock," answered Major Seton. "It will last over a good many hours, possibly will not be finished in one day. Sir John Durant is coming up, if he is well enough, by the first express, and will be in time, poor old man! to hear all that concerns him most—the evidence, such as it is, that will be brought forward in Gerald's defence."

"And you—when do you return?"

"By the mail-train to-night. I came down for a few hours only, principally, Archie, to see you."

"Did Mr Durant send me any message?"

"He bade me tell you that everything was right; and he hoped you would go over often and see his cousin Lucia."

"And what does a return-ticket cost from Hatton to London?"

"A return-ticket costs exactly two sovereigns, Archie. Do you want to go to London?"

"I wish you would lend me two sovereigns, Major Seton. I asked you for money before, and did not want it after all—most likely I shan't want this—still I wish that you would lend it to me."

He took out his purse and, without speaking a word, put two sovereigns into Archie's hand: burning with fever he felt her hand was as it came into contact with his own.

"You have nothing else to say to me, Archie, before I go? for my time is up; I must say good-bye to you directly. There is no other way in which I can be of use to you?"

"I—I don't know that there is," she faltered. "Tell Mr Durant you saw me and gave me his message, and—oh Ralph!" with a sudden impulse, and moving a step nearer to his side, "how I wish that I dared ask you one question before you go!"

"Ask it, Archie," said Ralph. "I will give you a very truthful answer if I can."

"Well, if—mind, this is all that I mean to tell you—if any one, a girl of my age, was placed . . . placed, how shall I say it?—so that to save another person she must run the risk of forfeiting her own good name, the good name of all the people she cared for most, what ought she to do? If I asked Bettina she would talk about pride and self-respect and family honour! and papa I cannot—I will not ask. Now what do you say?"

"*Fais ce que dois*," answered Major Seton, instantly. "Truth, uncompromising, unwavering, is the only rule of life that I have ever known to answer either for man or for woman. If pride and self-respect and family honour had to be maintained by sacrificing it, they would not, I should imagine, be worth holding—any of them."

"And the good opinion of the people who love one," faltered the girl, with pitiful earnestness, "Ralph—dear Ralph!—is that to be sacrificed as nothing too?"

"Most unquestionably," said Ralph, without a softening in-

flection in his staid Scotch voice. "Love that had to be bought by falsehood would be a dear bargain in the end, depend upon it, Archie."

"Ah! I am glad I had the courage to ask you this; there is only one more thing I have to trouble you about now. If, Ralph, at any time it should happen that you grow to despise or hate me—don't let it make any difference between you and papa. Everything bad that I have done has been by my own free will—no one ought to suffer for it but me—and papa—poor papa would want your friendship all the more if anything happened to turn him a little from me. Will you promise me this?"

"I don't think it requires a promise, Archie," he answered. "I endeavour when I can to be just. My regard for your father would be strengthened rather than lessened by any ill-doing of yours."

"Thank you, Ralph"—her heart dying within her at his coldness—"you have been very good to me, and I have been false to you from the first hour I saw you in Morteville till now! It's all past, and I don't know, if I had to go through it again, that I should act differently—however, it's no use talking about that now. You'll remember your word, I think? you'll be good to papa whatever happens—"

And then her voice broke into a sob: she turned; walked abruptly away from his side, and Ralph Seton saw her face no more.

Despise! hate! Never had he so passionately loved her as in this moment of her humiliation, this crowning hour of sorrow in her child's life! The truth was told: the "frivolous" heart of Archie Lovell laid bare before him at last.

CHAPTER XXXV.

AWAKENING CONSCIENCE.

The evening that had closed in with such fair promise for the morrow was already changing by the time that the moon rose, pale

and watery, above the distant woods. As night wore on, the wind swept up in fitful gusts from the south-west, bearing before it thick wreaths of serried lead-white cloud, and when the morning dawned it was in rain: fine driving rain, that fell with a persistent wintry sound against the exposed windows of Hatton Rectory, and laid low whatever summer flowers still lingered in the borders of its little upland garden.

And throughout all the dreary hours, from that chill moonrise to the chiller morning, Archie Lovell never slept. Men and women meet their troubles more sharply face to face upon their pillows than at any other time: a child sobs his to rest there in five minutes: and Archie till to-night had been a child, even in her fashion of suffering. This was past. The first real conflict of reason and passion which her life had known was stirring in her now: and sleep, the blessed immunity of unawakened conscience, was over. For a short space after her head was laid upon its pillow, the girl was her old self—the old childish mixture of frivolity and earnestness—still: speculating, through her tears, as to what Ralph had thought of her after her half-confession; wondering (if she went) what frock and ribbons she would look well in to-morrow; and if the magistrate would speak to her "out aloud" before all the lawyers and people in the court; and if her name, Archie Lovell, would really be put in print in the papers next day, and if, supposing she stayed away, some other witness would not be sure to come forward and save poor Mr Durant at the last! Then, when her faculties were more than half-way along the accustomed quick sweet road to sleep, every detail of her position and of her duty seemed suddenly to start out before her in a new light—a harsh, pitiless, concentrated light; such as she had never seen any position or any duty in before. It was not a question, a voice beside her pillow seemed to say, of whether her father might or might not suffer by her exposure; not a question of whether Gerald Durant had or had not deserved her gratitude, of whether she might or might not forfeit Ralph Seton's love. It was a question of abstract right or wrong; truth or falsehood; life or death as regarded her own soul, which her resolutions of to-night must solve. If she decided unrighteously: shielded her father, won Ralph's love, won the whole world, and perjured *that*, how much would she have

gained? This was what she had to answer. And starting back to fullest consciousness, with a trembling sense of some other presence than hers in the little room, the poor child sat up in her bed, and there—the cold dew standing on her face and hands, strove through the dark hours of the night to wrestle with the unseen awful monitor who had arisen to question her.

It is only, perhaps, by a strong effort of imagination that we who have fought many such battles, gained the victory sometimes, and more often succumbed, can picture to ourselves the first passionate conflict of so very white a soul as this. With all the suddenly awakened woman's conscience, Archie had still a child's narrow vision, a child's distorted fear of the punishment that would fall upon herself as the price of her truth-telling; and the greater part of her thoughts would be to the full as ludicrous as pathetic, if faithfully recorded. Of the truths originally laid down by Bettina, she never for an instant doubted. A girl who had passed a day and a night away from home, as she had done, must, if her story became known, be disgraced. No honest woman would associate with her; no honest man would ever make her his wife. Up to a certain hour to-morrow she would be Archie Lovell, a girl with all bright possibilities of life open before her still: after that—a blank. Never another ball, or croquet party, or happy walk with Ralph! No more pleasure in her good looks, or her dress: no more of the vague golden dreams which of late had made her like to be alone, looking up at the clouds, or across the woods to Ludbrooke, in the twilight! She would live on, year after year, in this dull Rectory-house; and her father would love her always—with a saddened, pitying love; and Bettina be justified in requiring her to be religious; and the servants whisper together, and look at her as something apart from the rest of the household; bitterest of all, Lady Durant and Lucia would know her, in a distant way, still, her father being the clergyman of their parish; Sir John, perhaps, his wife and daughter not by, stop and speak a kind word occasionally, when he met her in his walks. This would be her life. And in time, she would see Gerald happy with his fair young wife; and Ralph would marry too . . . were her friends to abstain from happiness because hers happened to be spoiled! and she would just continue to stagnate on, alone, un-

loved, till she was old and graceless, and bitter, like Mrs Maloney! This was to be her portion and reward for doing the thing that was right: and still towards the right (not towards Mr Gerald Durant, personally; inasmuch as he was young, and handsome, and fond of her: the foundation, hitherto, of whatever heroic resolves Archie had formed), she felt herself irresistibly drawn. Towards right, simply as right. Nothing to do with inherited traditions, as in Gerald's case: or with fears of heaven on one hand, and hopes of the world on the other, as in Bettina's. Right simply as right: a stern inflexible reality, to which, whether her cowardly will shrank from its fulfilment or no, she was forced, by some sympathy, some instinct stronger than herself, to cling.

She tossed feverishly on her pillow till dawn, then got up, went across to the casement-window, drew back the curtain, and looked out. Standing there in her long white dress, her feet bare, her hands clasped across her breast, poor Archie, who a week ago could have represented nothing higher in art than Greuze or Watteau, might at this moment have been taken as a living picture of one of Raphael's Marys: a girl still in the undeveloped form and childish attitude, a woman in the unutterable sadness, the wistful prophecy of suffering upon her quivering lips, and tear-stained, dead-white cheeks. It was barely daybreak yet. She could just discern the line of distant woods, wan and spectre-like, through the driving mists; could just see the geraniums and mignonette—the flowers that in her southern ignorance she had thought would last till Christmas—lying, sodden and defaced, beneath her window. What a miserable, altered world it looked! What an admirably fitted world for right and duty, and the life that she was going to lead in it! She stood, chill and shivering, yet with a sort of sullen satisfaction, watching the rain as it beat against the window; and while she watched it her heart—poor, unheroic child's heart! —went back to irresolution again. How would it be possible for her to walk to the station in weather like this? They had no carriage, and there was no way of hiring one, and her father and Bettina would never let her start alone on foot. She had meant, had meant faithfully, to go. Had she not borrowed money from Ralph for her journey last night? Could she help it if accidents beyond her own control held her back? If it had

been fine, and her father had given her leave, she would have gone; and now, if this storm lasted and her father forbade her to leave home, she must stay. It would no longer be a question of choice, it would be a decision made by fate, not herself, as to which path she took, and by that decision she must abide.

When dawn had become broad day she crept back to her bed, and in two or three minutes, the rain still driving against the window, was asleep. At seven o'clock Bettina knocked as usual at her door, calling out to her cheerfully that it was a beautiful morning after the rain, and, waking with a start from a heavy, dreamless sleep, Archie saw—with guilty disappointment even in that first instant of consciousness—a room full of light and sunshine. The storm was over. So far the path towards this miserable, self-imposed, inexorable duty of hers lay clear.

She got up; dressed herself in a clean white frock; then laid out ready on her drawers her muslin scarf, sailor's hat, and blue veil, and, for the first time since the day after her return from London, went down to breakfast with her hair hanging loose upon her shoulders.

"As I like to see you once more," said Mr Lovell, as he put his arms round her. "If you knew what was becoming, Archie, you would never torture your hair into fashionable braids and twists again. But how ill you look, my child!" anxiously scrutinizing the hard lines about her mouth, the worn, dark hollows under her eyes. "Bettina, don't you think her looking really ill? Wouldn't it be as wise for her to keep to her bed for a day, just to see whether it can be measles coming on again or not?"

If Bettina had thought enough about the question to say "Yes," Archie would probably have succumbed to her decision as final: the interposition of some will stronger than her own, and against which it would be idle for her to struggle. But all Mrs Lovell's energies happened to be directed at this particular moment to parish matters of the most vital and urgent interest. In the vestry of the church was to be held to-day the great annual meeting of the Hatton soup and flannel club, in which, the deceased rector being an old bachelor, the wife of the village doctor had for years held absolute and tyrannical sway. A secret cabal had long existed, it appeared, for the dethronement of this potentate; and in

Bettina—versed already in every detail of the village civil wars; convinced, too, that to be the head of soup and flannel was hers by anointed right—the cabal had at length found a leader. A large, an overwhelming, majority of voters were, she believed, safe on the side of herself and the new coalition. Still, at the very last, a designing, ambitious woman like the doctor's wife might be capable of anything—bribing the voters to stay away; incapacitating them *pro tem.* out of her husband's bottles; anything. And in fierce haste, her bonnet already on her head, Bettina, eager to be off to the field, was swallowing scalding tea, standing, and learning by heart an extempore speech with which she meant to address the meeting, when her husband spoke.

"Measles? Nonsense, Frederick! Not one person in a hundred has measles a second time. Let Archie be in the air all day, the heat makes her pale. 'It being the opinion of this meeting, and of the parish generally, that too much power has hitherto been usurped by *certain parties* . . .' That will be the very thing. Cutting, but not too personal. You are sure, Frederick, you will not look in upon us in the course of the meeting? Well, then, I must express your opinions for you. You shall not be a cipher in your own parish, as long as I can prevent it. Don't wait dinner for me—I may be away all day." And then, still learning her speech aloud as she walked, Mrs Lovell vanished; and another obstacle in the path of Archie's going to London was removed.

It was now nearly nine o'clock; the express train by which Sir John Durant was to go left Hatton station at ten. She went up to her room, put on her sailor's hat and white scarf, took the French grey parasol from Bettina's room, and came down again to her father. She had not the smallest idea of what she would have to do or say when she found herself in that London police court, but she thought vaguely that she had better appear there dressed exactly as she had been on the day of her flight from Morteville. It might help to prove that her story was true; the woman who lent her the cloak would be present, perhaps, to confront her; and she had no wish to hide one iota of the truth now. The magistrate, the lawyers, all the world should see her as she was on that day, the last day of her innocence—in her white frock, and sailor's hat, and with her hair hanging on her shoulders.

Perhaps (the hope half crossed her) they would not judge her so very hard when they saw how pretty and how childish she had looked at that fatal time of her wrong-doing!

Mr Lovell was in the room that was to be his study, standing before "Troy," a little disquieted in his heart as to that *chef d'œuvre* not being in the best possible light, when Archie returned to him. She thought of the night in Morteville when she had stood at his side in the little painting-room, and mourned with him for the old Bohemian life that was over for ever. Over—everything was over now! She crept up softly, and touched his hand.

"Papa, I have a favour to ask of you, please. Some of the Durants are going up to London and back to-day—Major Seton told me so last night—and I want you to let me go too. They will be quite ready to take care of me, I know."

Mr Lovell turned round and looked at her with open eyes.

"To London and back? Why, Archie, this will never do! No, no, no, child; don't take such fancies. The Durants are going up, of course, about this difficulty the young man—Gerald, is he called?—has got into, and won't want you. I couldn't hear of it. I shall be having you laid up in earnest. Ask me anything else."

"I want nothing else, papa. It shall be as you choose—only, I thought I would just ask you, you know." And she took off her hat, and seated herself down resignedly by the open window. Could she help it if her father insisted on withholding his consent? Had she not done as much as lay within her power to do by asking him?

"The weather, certainly, is not so hot after the rain as it was," said Mr Lovell, coming up to her side, and pretending to look out at the clouds. He had never been able to deny Archie anything since that morning fourteen years ago when he had refused to get up at five o'clock, and carry her round the Dresden market. "The weather is not as hot, and if I was quite sure we should have no more storms—only, unfortunately, my love, I have not a farthing of change in the house. I don't know how it happened, but Bettina took off my last shilling with her to this dreadful meeting."

"I have the money, papa, I have two sovereigns of my own, but I don't want to go unless you choose."

"And are you quite sure the Durants are going and want you? —not that I wonder at that—Miss Durant must be too glad, poor thing, to have you for her companion now. Well then, Archie, I don't know really that I ought to forbid it. It is like you, my little one, to wish to be with your friends at a season of trouble like this!"

And in a quarter of an hour's time Archie was walking across the meadow path that led the shortest way from the Rectory to the station. She was not going to be saved by accidental help, she felt now. Of her own free will she had taken the first step in the direction of right, but every obstacle that might have hindered its fulfilment had been removed by alien means, not by any endeavours of her own. Unless Sir John Durant were at the last too ill to travel, nothing could save her now from the accomplishment of her work. Unless! How tumultuously her heart throbbed at the thought! It would be impossible, utterly, for her to go alone—she, who knew nothing of London, not even the name of the court at which Gerald was to be tried. If Sir John Durant did not go, her whole self-constructed scheme of duty must, of necessity, fall to the ground. It would be a question of will no longer. She would have tried her best to carry out the moral suicide which she conceived to be right, and have failed in it perforce, not through any fault or weakness of her own.

The Durants' carriage stood at the door of Hatton station, and the first persons Archie saw as she entered the office were Sir John and Lucia standing together outside upon the platform. She bought a first-class return ticket for London—with a consciousness that the clerk stared strangely at her as he put it in her hand—went out and joined them.

"Going up to London and back alone?" cried Miss Durant, aghast, when Archie had declared her intentions. "Why, I should be frightened to death! I should think every one I met was a madman in disguise, or something more dreadful still! And—and in that dress!" drawing her aside. "Do you know, Miss Lovell?—you won't mind my telling you I am sure, but no one wears white dresses and sailor hats in London!"

"Don't they, indeed!" said Archie, brusquely; "well, I'm going on business, very painful business, and I shan't be thinking

whether people look at my dress or not. Who can think of dress at such a time as this, Lucia?" calling the heiress of Durant's Court by her Christian name for the first time—"you don't know how miserable I am about all this trouble that has fallen upon you."

From her infancy upwards, Lucia had always been equal to any emergency requiring pretty pious sentiments, and a nice little lady-like way of expressing them; and what she answered was very well chosen and well said, and utterly devoid, to Archie's heart, of anything like the ring of deep or passionate feeling. It had been terribly sudden, and her mamma at first had broken down, but was calmer now—their old governess and friend, Miss Barlow, having come to spend a few days with them—and it was very painful to think of its being in everybody's mouth, but there was much to be thankful for, especially that it should have occurred now, not later, and Miss Barlow's presence was a great solace to them; Miss Barlow having a mind beautifully schooled by affliction.

"I'd rather be alone," said Archie, turning from her abruptly. "I should decline solace from Miss Barlow, or Miss Anybody in the world, if *my* heart was full!"

After this she stood silent—thinking over the character of the woman for whose happiness she was about to surrender her own—until the train came up. Then, in spite of renewed warnings from Miss Durant as to madmen, got into a carriage away from old Sir John, and as it chanced remained alone the entire way to London. What an Eternity that journey seemed! how slow the pace—fifty miles an hour—to her feverish heart! how she hoped, with blent terror and impatience, that every large town they came near would be London at last! Now that the excitement of action had set in, all she wanted was to be at her journey's end, and before Ralph Seton—before the whole world—to tell her story in the court. The bravery which is not so much courage as a desperate desire to get through the worst quickly, had come to her at last: and the moment the train reached Euston Square she jumped out on the platform; then, without giving herself time to think or hesitate, walked straight up to Sir John Durant as he was getting down slowly and with difficulty from his carriage.

"I have a favour to ask of you, Sir John," bringing out each word with mechanical distinctness, as if she was repeating some lesson that she had learnt by heart. "Take me with you to the court where Mr Gerald Durant is to be tried to-day."

Poor old Sir John looked at her in blank surprise. "To the court? my dear Miss Lovell, impossible; you don't know what you ask—a London police-court is no place for you. At any other time, in any other way, you may command my services, but now you must really excuse me if I am obliged to refuse you." And he bowed to her, with his courteous old-fashioned air of deference, and walked on a few steps alone down the platform.

But Archie followed him pertinaciously. "Sir John, it is impossible for you to deny me in this!" she said, touching his arm with her hand. "I *must* be at Mr Durant's trial! I—I have important evidence to give there, and if you refuse to take me with you I must go alone. Surely, for your nephew's sake, you will give me your protection as far as the court?"

At the word "evidence" Sir John Durant stopped; and as he looked down into Archie Lovell's face, something in its intense, its painful eagerness, touched him with an irresistible conviction of her sincerity at least. That her presence could be of any service to Gerald was of course out of the question: but it was impossible to doubt that her request was made in good faith; not for the gratification of a girlish caprice, as he had thought at first.

"You will take me with you?" she repeated, as she saw him hesitate. "You will help me, for Gerald's sake, in what I have to do when we reach the court?"

"You put it out of my power to refuse you, Miss Lovell," answered the old man, gravely. "If you insist upon exposing yourself—uselessly, I fear—to a scene of such a nature, I will certainly take you with me to the court, and when we arrive there I will arrange, if it is not too late, for you to speak with one of my nephew's lawyers, if I am satisfied, that is to say—"

"You will—you must be satisfied!" interrupted Archie, impetuously. "Do you think I am asking you this without reason, or for my own pleasure? You talk of being too late. . . . Why do we waste a moment standing here if there is a chance of it?" And putting her hand within Sir John Durant's arm, she walked

beside him with a firm unshrinking step through the crowded station: a minute later knew that she was being borne along through the mocking glare and life and tumult of the London streets to her doom.

Too late! Oh, Heaven, too late! But the guilty cry found utterance in her heart alone. All was not over then—there was a chance of her own salvation even yet!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

"WHERE IS SHE?"

Some of the best lawyers in England had been retained for Gerald: the great Mr Slight to watch his case during the preliminary examination: the greater Serjeant Adams to defend him in the event of his being tried hereafter before a judge. Some of the best lawyers in England were engaged, likewise, on the side of the Crown: and amongst the whole high legal phalanx, amongst the lawyers for the prosecution and the lawyers for the defence alike, one opinion was fast becoming universal: namely, that the prisoner's committal for trial was inevitable.

Whether Gerald Durant happened to be guilty or innocent in the matter was, of course, a very secondary detail in the sight of the profession. The vital question was: would the evidence against him be too much even for Slight—now that the Crown had recalled old Sleek from Italy to conduct the prosecution? And the unanimous answer was, Yes. Not a link seemed wanting in the chain of circumstantial evidence that Mr Wickham's fertile genius had evoked. The motive for committing the crime with which the prisoner stood charged: his presence at the fatal hour upon the scene of guilt: the identity of the girl who was seen in his company on London Bridge: his suspicious manner immediately after her death was known to have taken place: of these, as of a dozen other minor facts, there was, it was affirmed, proof incontestable. And still, as far even as an attempt at his

own justification went, Gerald Durant's lips, to friends and counsellors alike, continued obstinately sealed! He was innocent, he said, and had not the slightest fear of anything so ridiculous as the law finding him guilty. No innocent men were ever condemned now-a-days, and very few guilty ones. Circumstances connected with other people withheld him from explaining one or two things that at present, perhaps, did look rather suspicious in the case. It was folly to think that everything would not come right in the end. And so when the final day of his examination came, and while his approaching committal was looked upon as a certainty among the lawyers, even those who cared for Gerald most, dared hope no more than that he might escape the charge of actual criminality as regarded Margaret Hall's death. That he was with her up to the last there seemed scarcely a possibility of disproving; that he was the cause of her death there could be, it was hoped, no direct evidence to show. What more likely than that, immediately after leaving her lover, or, as it was now whispered pretty loudly, her husband, the unhappy girl, maddened by his neglect or his coldness, had made away with her own life? Not a defence calculated, certainly, to restore Gerald Durant with unsullied name to the world; but when it becomes a question, like this, of life and death, what the friends of an accused man begin to think about, I imagine, is his safety—the life that is worth so little, rather than the good name, without which, to most men, life itself is intolerable. This, at all events, was the desperate view of his case to which, with one exception, Gerald's friends (men who a fortnight ago would have staked their lives upon the certainty of his innocence) were now reduced.

The exception was Ralph. Of the promise which sealed Gerald's lips with respect to Dennison's marriage, he of course knew nothing; of his silence concerning that fatal night when Archie Lovell had been his companion in London, Major Seton understood the cause as well as Gerald understood it himself. And placed in the same position—yes, even with Archie to be saved, Ralph, in his inmost, modest heart, believed that he would have acted far less chivalrously than his friend.

"A man's first duty is to his God—his second to himself," he said to Gerald on the morning of the final examination; the last

time he ever visited Gerald Durant in his prison. "I know, just as well as if you had told me, that you are silent to shelter some other person's reputation, and I believe, on my soul, that you are wrong! If I was in your place, and knew that my truth-telling would cover with mere conventional shame the name—well, the name of the woman I loved best on earth," said Ralph, the blood rising over his rough old face, "and save my own from blackest, unmerited dishonour, I believe that I would tell it. I don't see that you owe a stronger duty to any man or woman living than you owe to yourself. The thing is, to do simply what is right."

"Right!" said Gerald, with a smile; that careless smile of his which was the real beauty of his face. "But, my dear fellow, what is right? *Monsieur Seton me le reponds, mais qui me reponds de Monsieur Seton?* The world, according to Figuier, I never went deeper, was in twilight during a few thousand years—Cambrian or Silurian epoch, I forget which—with the sun just strong enough to allow the graptolites and trilobites to see a yard or two before their noses. I suppose we are morally in the same kind of twilight now. Vague lights break in upon us of something higher than mere eating, drinking, and sleeping, and in our different ways, and under different names, we try to follow them. Definitely, we don't see much farther, I fancy, than the trilobites did; not so far, perhaps, for as their eyes had about five hundred facets that enabled them to look about them in all directions at once, they were better adapted to their situation most likely than we are to ours."

This was talk entirely out of the range of the old Moustache. Who was Figuier? and what were graptolites and trilobites? The earth at the beginning was without form and void, and in six days was covered with life as we see it now. And truth was truth, and falsehood falsehood; and neither deep thinking nor fine talking had ever smoothened down the path between them in his sight.

"You follow your own idea of honour, Durant," laying his arm affectionately on Gerald's shoulder, "and—while you talk of not distinguishing right from wrong—'tis a nobler one, I feel, than mine; just that. You have the edge on all your finer emotions yet"—poor simple Ralph!—"and mine is blunted.

When you have lived to my age perhaps you will not think any woman worth the sacrifice of your own honour, the risk of your own life."

"I should think this one worth it always," said Gerald, simply; "for there can be no harm now in my confessing this much to you, Seton—there *is* a good name, a name worth a vast deal more than mine, that my silence shields. If it had been a love-affair, which it never was"—even at this moment what a thrill of delight shot through Major Seton's heart!—"I might feel very differently. Love, between a man and woman of the world, I have always held to be a stand-up fight, in which a fair field and no favour is all that can be reasonably required on either side. Each risks something; each must abide by the issue of the contest. But this was nothing of the kind. An honest, true-hearted little girl through me was very nearly brought to grief once. I don't say whether I was in love with her; for certain she was not in love with me, and—well, everything turned out as it should have done, and is forgotten."

"And this is the woman with whom you were seen on that night?" said Ralph in an altered voice, as Gerald hesitated. "This is—"

"This is one of the causes for which I am and ever shall be silent," answered Gerald, gravely. "To betray such a trust would be a worse betrayal than that of friend or mistress—the betrayal of a child. If the honour of every Durant who ever lived could be saved by her disgrace, the honour of the Durants should go!" And then he turned the conversation pointedly aside, and during the short remainder of time they were together, spoke only of the business matters that he wished Ralph to fulfil for him in the event of his committal; an event which, in spite of all his outward calmness, Major Seton could see he had now thoroughly prepared himself to meet.

The time at which the examination was to take place was ten o'clock. From an early hour in the morning, however, every approach to the court was besieged by such people—many of them, although London was "empty" of the better class—as were possessed of cards giving them a right of entrance to this charming little sensation drama of real life about to be played. Without

such cards no admission save by sheer physical strength could be obtained; and even the fortunate men and women who held them found they had plenty of hard work to go through, many a severe struggle with the experienced roughs to encounter, before an entrance to the scene of their morning's amusement could be won.

At ten o'clock precisely the prisoner, or principal actor in the entertainment, was brought into the dock; and a breathless hush passed through the entire mass of spectators at the sight of him. He was a little pale and worn, as any man might well be after a week spent in a London prison in August, but looked in good spirits and smiled and nodded to his different friends, Ralph among the rest, as one after another he recognized them amidst the crowd. Mr Slight, who "watched" the case for the prisoner, now applied for a copy of the information on which the warrant was granted, with a view, he said, to see what were the statements laid down, and also who was nominally the prosecutor in the case. This, after some discussion, was granted; and then the warrant having been read over to the prisoner, and the witnesses ordered out of court, the well-known short, rubicund figure of Mr Sleek rose, on behalf of the Crown, to address the bench.

He appeared before them, he said, in his soft, well-modulated voice, for the purpose of preferring and bringing home, as he trusted he would do, the charge against the prisoner at the bar which had just been read from the warrant. The offence they were about to inquire into was one of a most heinous character. He did not think that he should be putting it too strongly if he said it was one of *the* most heinous, the most cowardly, the most repugnant to every natural and divine law, that it was in the power of man to commit. Such observations however (having made them) were, Mr Sleek continued, out of place here. They had met for the purpose only of instituting a preliminary examination; and if he should adduce facts to justify the bench in committing the prisoner for trial, it would of course be the duty of the prosecution to elaborate those facts, and produce them hereafter in a more complete form than he had an opportunity of doing in this court. The offence with which Mr Durant stood charged was that of murder; the victim was a young and beautiful girl—a girl, it was scarcely possible to doubt, bound to the prisoner by all those

ties which constitute a woman's dearest and most sacred claim to man's love and protection. Mr Sleek and the court generally showed emotion; an irrepressible smile passed for an instant over Gerald's face. It appeared that at about a quarter-past ten on the night of the second instant, a dark body was heard to fall or to be thrown with violence into the Thames from London Bridge; an alarm was instantly raised, and by three o'clock next morning the body of deceased was found, some three or four hundred yards down the river, with life extinct. An inquest was held on the following day, but was unfortunately conducted with the deplorable looseness that Mr Sleek had observed to be the general rule of coroners' inquests, and nothing of material importance was brought to light. Circumstances arising, however, immediately afterwards which aroused the suspicions of the police, to Inspector Wickham of the detective force was intrusted the duty of making further inquiry into this darkly mysterious tragedy; and—thanks to the skill and unremitting attention of that excellent officer—the prosecution was now in a position to present to the bench the following facts: facts which Mr Sleek believed could leave them no alternative whatever but the committal of the prisoner for trial before another court. It seemed that as long ago as the tenth of January, the deceased girl left her employer's house in Staffordshire, and although rumours as to the supposed companion of her flight were rife at the time about the county, nothing definite had since transpired on the subject. On the night of the second instant, a girl dressed in the clothes in which the body of Margaret Hall was afterwards found was seen, at a few minutes before ten, walking across London Bridge from the Surrey side upon a man's arm; at a quarter-past ten a woman's shriek was heard, a dark body seen to fall into the water; and by an early hour next morning a woman's body was found drifted in among some shipping at a little distance down the river. That the woman who thus crossed the bridge was Margaret Hall there was, as he should hereafter show, no reasonable cause to doubt. The man upon whose arm she leaned was, it would be proved by incontestable evidence, the prisoner —Mr Gerald Durant.

Profound sensation through the court. A smile, unconcealed this time, passed across the prisoner's face.

Medical testimony, proceeded Mr Sleek, would be called to show the condition in which the body was found. They would be told of a wedding-ring tied by a ribbon around the unhappy girl's neck; of a handkerchief embroidered with Mr Durant's monogram in her breast; and they would also hear evidence as to a man's hat, which was found floating in the river; and which it would be proved was the property of the prisoner. The next points that it would be his duty to bring before their consideration were the acts and conduct of Mr Durant himself. On that second day of August he was proved to have crossed from Morteville to London in the company of a young girl, answering to the description of the deceased, Margaret Hall. On the passage across, one of their fellow-travellers lent the girl a cloak, which in the hurry of landing was not returned to its owner, and in this cloak the body of Margaret Hall was found. At about ten o'clock, as he had stated, Mr Durant, with the girl upon his arm, was seen walking upon London Bridge, and it was remarked at the time that there was something strange and excited about the appearance of them both. What was the prisoner's subsequent conduct? Between eleven and twelve, minus a hat, and with his dress disordered and torn, Mr Durant went to the chambers of a Mr Robert Dennison, a relation of his, in the Temple; gave curt and contradictory answers when questioned by his friends as to the strangeness of his appearance; and finally let fall a remark about having just seen the ghost of an old friend's face—"a Staffordshire face"—on London Bridge, as though to account for his pallor and depression. Every portion of this evidence was, Mr Sleek allowed, circumstantial; but it was not necessary, neither was it his place to observe, that a concurrence of suspicious circumstances was of all human evidence the one least liable to bias or error, more particularly when the silence of the accused and of his counsellors tacitly admitted such circumstances to be authentic. It was a melancholy satisfaction of course to know that Mr Durant was in a position to command the best services of the profession. Her Majesty's government wished to press a conviction upon no man; and it was a satisfaction to know that everything that could be said on behalf of the prisoner *would* be said, and with the greatest force and eloquence. Still, what would really tell far more in Mr Durant's favour, what

it would yield himself, Mr Sleek, the most unmixed personal satisfaction to hear, would be—not eloquence at all, but a plain straightforward counter-statement of facts as regarded Mr Durant's proceedings on the night of August the second! It was an axiom of English law that no man should be called upon to offer explanations of his conduct or of any circumstances of suspicion which might attach to him. It was his duty, however, to remark that if an accused person refused such explanation, where a strong *primâ facie* case had been made out against him, it must necessarily raise a presumption that his silence arose from guilty or sinister motives. Could common sense do otherwise than adopt this conclusion, especially when, as in the present case, it was manifest that facts inaccessible to the prosecution were in the power of the accused? Mr Durant, it was proved, did on the second day of August cross from Morteville to London in the company of a lady. By the testimony of his own valet it appeared that he was left alone with this lady between eight and nine o'clock at the South-Eastern Terminus; and at ten o'clock, a quarter of an hour only before Margaret Hall's death took place, it would be shown that he was once more seen standing by her side on London Bridge.

"And now, with respect to this lady," exclaimed Mr Sleek, with sudden fervour, "I have a question to ask which I am certain must address itself with irresistible force to every person in this court. Where is she? If this lady, as it will doubtless be alleged, was not Margaret Hall, but some other person still living and well, is her evidence to be adduced or not on the prisoner's behalf? It may, and doubtless will, be hinted to us that there may be cases in which a man would risk the unmerited punishment of guilt sooner than bring forward a woman's name before the world; but I put it to you, whether the lips of a man charged with the most heinous and cowardly of all crimes could remain so sealed? Nay more, I ask does the woman live who would see an innocent man incur even the imputation of a crime like this sooner than allow the record of her own indiscretion, of her own frailty, to be made public?"

They might be told, he proceeded, that the lady who accompanied Mr Durant from France did certainly wear this scarlet

travelling cloak when she arrived in London, but might yet have transferred it to the deceased during the few minutes that elapsed between the time when she was last seen at Mr Durant's side and that of Margaret Hall's death. If they accepted this startling assumption, if they for once presumed that any given fact was due, not to criminality, but to untoward accident, they would, certainly, be less inclined towards such a merciful supposition a second time. But, alas! this unhappy victim to adverse coincidences would call upon them immediately afterwards to give another violent mental wrench favourable to his innocence. A handkerchief embroidered with Gerald Sydney Durant's initials was found in the woman's breast. It had been well said that the die which is orderly in its sequences may be rightly supposed to be loaded. Every successive circumstance that bore against the prisoner was, it must be remembered, cumulative proof—proof multiplied by hundreds. And when to the foregoing facts was added that of Mr Durant's hat being found floating near the body of the deceased, it seemed folly to ask them again to receive an arbitrary and separate conclusion instead of the plain cause which could alone account for this overpowering accumulation of dark facts—the prisoner's guilt. With regard, he said, to Mr Durant's manner at his cousin's chambers, it was not his province now to speak. This conduct might possibly be compatible with innocence if it stood alone, but it must be recollected that it was one of a series of facts which, though small, perhaps, in their individual capacity, did, when grouped together, lead to the irresistible conclusion that the prisoner had secret and guilty knowledge of the girl's death. What motive could have prompted the crime it was unneedful also for him to suggest. A dark drama, an old story of passion, satiety, and neglect, of which this was the closing scene, had doubtless been enacted. He had to do with facts alone; and these were the facts which he was able to present to the bench. They saw in the prisoner a young man overwhelmed with debts which he was utterly powerless to meet unaided. His uncle, Sir John Durant, was the only person to whom he could look for assistance; and his uncle, it was known, not three weeks ago, had threatened to disinherit him if his reported connection with Margaret Hall proved to be a fact. They next found him alone

with the unhappy girl on London Bridge upon the night of her death. They had then the mute and touching evidence of the body itself—the wedding-ring tied around her neck; the handkerchief of Gerald Durant in her breast; and lastly, they had the fact that the prisoner already realized to the full those advantages for which, it might be surmised, the death was accomplished. Whatever benefit of doubt Mr Durant might be entitled to would, for certain, be amply accorded to him hereafter. He believed himself that the magistrates could come to no other conclusion now than that the case was fraught with suspicions of the gravest character, and that the interests of public justice imperatively demanded that the prisoner should be sent for trial before another and a higher tribunal.

And then Mr Sleek wiped his crimson face, and sat down. His address had been, intentionally, a short one, for the thermometer stood at ninety-six in the shade; and, in common with every other lawyer present, Mr Sleek fervently hoped to get the examination over to-day. A great surgeon, recalled by enormous fees, to cut off the limb of an illustrious patient, knows that he will be forced to wait and watch over the result of the operation. With a lawyer, what is done is done. Whether Mr Sleek or Mr Slight got the best of it, their work would be finished, their fees paid, the moment the bench had pronounced its judgment upon the prisoner; and a pardonable preference for mountain oxygen to city carbonic acid in August made both of them disposed to be concise. Mr Sleek's address had not lasted two hours; Mr Slight's for certain would not occupy more; and it was now only twelve o'clock. By employing a little happy brevity in cross-examination they might yet be able to have a comfortable dinner together, and start off on their respective journeys—one for the Highlands, the other for the Italian lakes—to-night.

The first witness called was Mrs Sherborne of Heathcotes, and as she came into the witness-box, making her village curtsey to the usher, whom in her agitation she took for the magistrate at least, her country carriage and open sunburnt face seemed almost to bring a breath of wholesome meadow freshness into the noisome human atmosphere of the court. Her first movement was to look towards the prisoner and cry; her second, upon a mild opening

question from the bench, to plunge into wildly irrelevant statements about Sir John's goodness to her husband, and her regret at having to appear against Mr Gerald, and the love she had always borne to the family at the Court. But a little judicious treatment at the hands of Mr Sleek soon reduced these symptoms of contumacy, and brought the poor woman to a due sense of the position in which she stood, as an important and accredited witness on the side of the Crown. After giving her evidence as to the identification of Margaret Hall after death, Mrs Sherborne was desired to tell what she knew about her disappearance in January last, and she had just faltered out a few tearful words as to the note the poor girl had written home, and how it was thought about in the county at the time, when Mr Slight jumped up and, with a stony face and peremptory voice, interrupted her. They had nothing to do in this court with what was "thought about" by anybody anywhere. They had to do with Mrs Sherborne's personal evidence, of which he should be glad to hear rather more than she had at present given them. And then, putting up his double eyeglass and looking at her with a certain expression of disbelief and insolence, that made the modest countrywoman almost ready to drop with shame, Mr Slight proceeded to cross-question her a little.

"Flighty? strange? No, never!—never saw anything unusual, in any way, in poor Maggie's manner. She was a handsome girl —a skin like snow, gentleman" (with an apologetic curtsey to the bench), "and eyes and hair like the raven's wing, and a bit set up about it, perhaps, at times; but as honest a girl, and as cool a hand for butter as ever churned. Suitors? Well, for the matter of that, she'd as many suitors as most. In her own class of life? Certainly; whose else class should they be in?" For, in spite of her terror, Mrs Sherborne had her keen country wits about her still. She was in that witness-box to speak the truth—if truth-telling could do it, to get poor Mr Gerald out of his trouble. But she was equally there to shield the honour of the girl that was dead and gone, and a subtle woman's instinct had interpreted to her aright the object of Mr Slight's last question.

"And Margaret Hall accepted none of these suitors of her own class of life, it appears, Mrs Sherborne! What did she say to the suitors of a class above her own?"

"I can't tell, sir."

"You can't tell. Were gentlemen—unmarried ones—accustomed to come about the farm at Heathcotes during the time that Margaret Hall was in your emyloyment?"

"Yes, certainly. A many gentleman used to come to see my husband and me."

"Name those who came oftenest."

Mrs Sherborne hesitated, and shot a quick appealing glance across towards Gerald. "Sir George Chester used to come when he were down at the Court, sir; and Mr Robert Dennison, and sometimes Mr Gerald Durant himself, and—"

"Mrs Sherborne," exclaimed Mr Slight, suddenly exchanging his air of bantering encouragement for one of scowling ferocity, "have the goodness to weigh your answers more carefully, and remember this is not a time or place for levity." The poor woman's mouth was contorted, through nervousness, into the ghastly semblance of a smile. "Have you, or have you not, known Mr Robert Dennison to be frequently alone in the company of Margaret Hall?"

Gerald's lips had continued inviolably sealed as respected his personal knowledge of Robert's marriage with Maggie; but he had never hidden, or sought to hide, from his counsel any of the well-known facts relative to their extreme intimacy. His promise to Robert, his faith with Archie Lovell, were all that he felt himself bound to keep. Quixotic enough to lay aside any legitimate weapon of self-defence, he was not—and Mr Slight, without any positive knowledge of the truth, suspected enough to be sure that his client had neither been the sole nor the first claimant upon poor Maggie's affection.

"Have you, or have you not, frequently seen Mr Dennison alone in the girl's company?" he repeated.

"Well, I have seen him, sir; but not oftener—"

"Keep to what I ask you, Mrs Sherborne," interrupted Mr Slight, in a cruel voice, "and leave every other subject alone. You have seen Mr Dennison in the girl's company. How often?"

"I don't remember, sir," answered Mrs Sherborne piteously.

"Try to think, if you please. Six times? Ten times?"

"Oh dear, yes," she cried, brightening at having something definite to go upon. "The young gentlemen used to walk down Heathcotes way after their dinner, one one time, perhaps, and one another, and then Maggie she'd walk a bit with them in the garden or round the orchard while they smoked their cigars. I'd known both of them from boys, gentlemen," she added, turning towards the magistrate, with her good, brown face softening all over, "and never gave a thought—me or my husband either—that harm would come of it."

"No more with one than with the other, I suppose, Mrs Sherborne?" put in Mr Slight, blandly.

"No, sir."

"Exactly!" and Mr Slight sat down. The evidence for the prosecution had assuredly not done much damage to his client's cause as yet.

At the appearance of the next witness who entered the box Gerald half rose, and leaned forward with an expression of greater eagerness than his face had worn before. The witness was Captain Waters, and as his eyes met the prisoner's a certain veiled look of intelligence passed for a second between them.

The man had got his hush-money, but—was he safe? was Gerald's uneasy thought, for at his direction a goodly sum had been paid anonymously to Waters, with sternest injunctions never to molest Miss Lovell, or seek in any way to bring her name forward while he lived. The scoundrel had received his bribe, but how was he to know that another man had not meanwhile bid a higher price over his head?

"You may be perfectly at your ease, my infatuated but chivalrous young friend," was Waters' reflection, as he caught sight of Gerald's eager face. "No fear of my killing the goose that lays such very golden eggs! If you are committed for your trial, as you certainly will be, I shall have an income safe without work or trouble for the next six months—a small annuity perhaps for life!"

And then, in his accustomed bored languid tone, Captain Waters, or Edward Randall, as his name was written in the police-sheet, gave his evidence. Had stayed in the same hotel with Mr Durant about three weeks ago, at Morteville. Remembered seeing

him on board a steamer bound for England from the Calais pier. Had no conception what the name of the steamer was; never remembered the names of steamers—wouldn't Bradshaw tell? It seemed a small vessel, chiefly occupied by persons of the lower class. Believed he spoke to Mr Durant from the pier—was sure he did, now he thought of it—congratulated him, if he recollected right, on having got away from Morteville. A lady was certainly at Mr Durant's side—might have had his arm—seldom felt sure of anything to take a positive oath to it. If obliged to bet? Well, would rather say she had not got his arm—couldn't see the object of people going about arm-in-arm on board steamers. The lady was too closely veiled for him to see her face—did not, to the best of his remembrance, wear a red cloak; believed she was in white, but positively declined swearing about articles of female dress. Certainly had seen Mr Durant in the society of ladies at Morteville. What ladies? Lots of ladies—could it really be expected of him to know their names? Never thought Mr Durant seemed harder up for money than other men—paid, at all events, what he lost to him at cards. How much? Well, a very trifling sum; between a hundred and a hundred and fifty pounds, he should say.

This was Captain Waters' evidence; and it was to be remarked that he was not cross-questioned or meddled with in any way by Mr Slight while he gave it. The next name called was that of Sophia Dawson. A rumour had got abroad that the evidence of this witness was to be of the most fatal importance as regarded Gerald; and a silence, such as hushes the opera house when some great actress plays the Bridge scene in *Somnambula*, prevailed through the court during her examination. She was, she stated, the wife of Mr Alfred Dawson, merchant, of the city of London, and on the second of the present month returned to England from a visit that she had been paying to her sister in Paris. She happened to miss the mail in the morning, and crossed by the Lord of the Isles, an excursion steamer that left Morteville at two in the afternoon. Soon after getting clear of Calais the wind rose fresh, and as she, witness, felt ill, and was going down to the cabin, she offered her cloak to a young girl whom she saw sitting in a thin summer dress upon the deck. Yes; the cloak produced (a thrill of satisfaction seemed to run through the expectant crowd at sight

of it!) was hers. The colour was stained and altered, but she was positive as to its being the cloak she lent to the girl on board the steamer. Her initials were marked on a piece of tape stitched inside the collar. She would know it, even without these initials, among a hundred cloaks. It was home made, and she had cut out the hood and put it together herself. Saw no more of the girl till they came up the river, and then found her sitting on deck in the company of the same gentleman with whom she had at first noticed her off the coast of France. That gentleman was, she could swear, the prisoner at the bar—but the woman's kindly face here paled visibly as Gerald turned and looked at her full. Knew at the time that his name was Durant; read it on a valise that his servant carried in his hand. Told the girl she might keep the cloak on still, as the air was fresh coming up the river, and when they reached London Bridge forgot all about it in the hurry of landing, and did not see the lady or gentleman again. The cloak was of no great value, and she had never made any inquiries about its loss. Had forgotten all about it until a few days ago, when an advertisement in *The Times* was pointed out to her by a friend. This advertisement was addressed to the lady who lost a scarlet cloak on board the Lord of the Isles on such a date; and her husband thought it right to communicate at once with the police.

This was her evidence. In cross-examination, very suavely and cautiously conducted by Mr Slight, Mrs Dawson stated, with confidence, that she could swear to the person of the girl to whom she lent her cloak. It was an uncommon face, and she remembered it perfectly. The girl's veil was not over her face when she first spoke to her.

The photographs of Margaret Hall, and of one or two other indifferent persons, were now handed to the witness. She examined them as she was directed to do, under a strong microscope, but would not swear as to whether the portrait of the girl who was with the prisoner was among them or not. Did not think much of photographs herself; never had. Would she swear none of them was the portrait of the girl? No, she would not. Declined giving any opinion on the subject. Would swear to her own cloak: would swear to the gentleman. Was positive she could

swear to the young lady if she saw her. She had bright blue eyes, long fair hair, and a brown complexion.

The prisoner at this point leaned anxiously forward, and evidently tried to arrest Mr Slight's attention. But Mr Slight either did not, or would not, understand the glance. His client's case was just as weak as it was possible to be already; but whatever could be done to strengthen it, Mr Slight was determined to do: and this last voluntary statement of Mrs Dawson's was, he knew, the brightest ray of light that had dawned as yet for the defence.

"Blue eyes and fair hair. You state upon your oath, that the young person to whom you lent your cloak had blue eyes?"

"I do." But here, re-examined by the bench, Mrs Dawson confessed to having been sea-sick at the time she lent the girl her cloak. Her head was swimming round; and she saw nothing distinctly. When they got into the river, the girl had put down her veil, and she could not, for certain, say that she had remarked the colour of her eyes then.

"And yet, two minutes ago, you positively stated that the young woman's eyes were blue?" exclaimed Mr Slight, indignantly. "I must really request, madam, that you will recollect the importance of your words. You are not, you know, deciding as to the colour of a new dress, but answering a question upon which a man's life may depend. We have nothing to do in this court with your sea-sickness, or any condition of your bodily frame whatsoever. Do you swear that the young woman to whom you lent your cloak on board the Lord of the Isles had blue eyes? Yes, or no?"

"I swear that she had blue eyes."

"Good. Now, Mrs Dawson, what was the manner, may I ask, of Mr Durant to the young person during the voyage? Sea-sick, or not sea-sick, this is a point to which no young married lady"—Mrs Dawson was forty-five at least—"can ever be blind. Was it your opinion at the time, now, that Mr Durant and this young person were man and wife?"

But to this question, Mr Sleek positively objected. The private opinions or deductions of any individual—as his friend, Mr Slight, with admirable clearness, had reminded them—not

being evidence; and the bench confirming this objection, Mr Slight had to repeat his question in its first form—What was the manner of Mr Durant to the young person with whom he travelled?

A very polite manner. That, of course. He never doubted for a moment, that the manner of any gentleman to any lady would be a polite one. Was it a marked manner? the manner of a lover, in short?

Well, no; Mrs Dawson could not say it was. She thought, at the time, they looked like brother and sister, or, perhaps, two young people gone off for a freak. The girl's manner seemed very good-natured and off-hand with her companion—certainly not the manner of a wife to a husband. And now, having worked round after all to the exact admission that he required, Mr Slight allowed the witness to leave the box.

The evidence of constable X 22, of the City division of police, was next taken. He was on his beat, he said, on the night of August the second, and remembered seeing a girl and a gentleman standing together on London Bridge, a few minutes before ten o'clock. Saw the gentleman's face as distinct as if it had been broad day, for they were standing talking immediately under a lamp, when he came up, and he stopped a minute to look at them. The prisoner at the bar was the gentleman: identified him about a week ago, when, under Mr Wickham's directions, he watched him from an opposite window at his lodgings at Clarges Street. Thought on the night of the second they must be foreigners, from their queer appearance—the lady was, he described, in a scarlet travelling-cloak; the gentleman without a hat. Thought there seemed some kind of discussion going on between them. There had been a disturbance (this in cross-examination) on the bridge just before; but couldn't say if the prisoner had been mixed up in it or not.

One of the lightermen who first raised the alarm on the night of the second was now brought forward. The clocks had gone the quarter, he said, about four or five minutes before. Could take his Bible oath he was right as to time. It was his turn to go ashore at half-past ten; and he had been counting the different quarters as they struck. It was a clear night, and he was sitting smoking his pipe on deck, when he heard a woman's shriek, and

immediately afterwards saw the splash of some heavy object, close alongside, it seemed, of where the barge was moored. Was not present when the body was found. He and his mate gave the alarm at once; and went ashore as usual at the half-hour.

Lengthened medical evidence came next from the doctors who had before appeared at the inquest, and who still held conflicting opinions as to what had been the immediate cause of death, and whether death had or had not taken place before the body reached the water. After this—science having been apathetically listened to by the experienced trial-goers as a sort of interlude, or by-play, not bearing upon the general interest of the plot—the testimony of the river police, with its accustomed burthen of dark horrors, was recorded; and then—

Then, every man and woman in that dense crowd pressing breathlessly forward to catch a sight of him, Mr Robert Dennison was summoned to take his place in the witness-box.

His face wore a cadaverous yellow hue—the hue of a man who has newly passed through some sharp bodily pain or sickness; but still the dark eyes kept their counsel inviolate as ever: still not a quiver of the lips betrayed either fear or weakness to any who were watching him. As soon as he appeared, Gerald Durant leant forward, upon his clasped arms, over the ledge of the dock, fixing his eyes steadfastly upon his cousin's face: and so, for a few silent moments, they stood—the guilty man and the innocent one—confronting each other. This was perhaps the strongest situation in the whole morning's performance; and a good many of the ladies present raised their handkerchiefs to their eyes. The sympathies of the common people were, here as throughout, upon Gerald Durant's side. The educated and refined few were naturally alive to the pathos of poor Mr Dennison's position; the intense suffering with which this duty of giving evidence against one so near akin to him as the prisoner must be performed.

He was examined by Mr Sleek, and stated that he was first cousin to Gerald Durant, and had been on terms of intimacy and affection with him all his life. On the first of the present month he parted from his cousin at Morteville. Did not know that he was in particular money difficulties at the time; was about the same in that respect as most young men of his profession and age.

An estrangement had certainly existed between Gerald and his uncle, Sir John Durant. Saw his cousin next on the night of the following day, August the second. On that occasion witness had a party of friends dining with him in his chambers, and towards midnight Gerald Durant unexpectedly came in. He was dressed in a morning suit, and explained that he had only arrived in London that evening by a steamer from France. Did not recollect anything unusual in his appearance: was unable to say whether he had a hat with him or not. Admitted—and that the admission cost him dear no one looking at Robert Dennison's face, his bloodless lips, the great drops standing upon his livid forehead, could doubt—that the prisoner had made some allusion to having been on London Bridge that night: did not remember the exact words the prisoner used.

Mr Sleek: "I must beg of you to recollect them, Mr Dennison. The prosecution has every wish to spare the feelings of you and of your family to the uttermost, but this is a most important part of the evidence, and cannot be slurred over."

And thus abjured—and with Gerald's eyes upon him still!—Mr Dennison spoke. As the evening progressed, and as some of the guests were preparing to leave, Gerald Durant asked him what old friend he imagined he had seen that night on London Bridge. Witness answered that he did not know; and Gerald Durant then went on to say that he had seen a Staffordshire face they both knew, or one so like it as to be its ghost, crouching out of sight in one of the recesses of London Bridge. Witness treated the remark lightly at the time, not knowing any Staffordshire person who would be likely to be seen in such a position. Thought, and still believed, it to be meant as a joke. Parted that night on friendly terms with his cousin, and had not seen him since. Had held no communication with Mr Durant since his arrest.

All this portion of Robert Dennison's deposition could be scarcely more than guessed at in the court, for he spoke in an excessively low key, and with a voice that trembled either with feigned or unfeigned agitation. But as soon as Mr Slight commenced his cross-examination, Mr Dennison was forced, agitated or not, to be audible. No one knew better how to affect occasional deafness than Mr Slight. No one knew better than Mr Slight

the effect upon some witnesses of being forced to speak out in a tone that the whole court could hear.

"You parted from the prisoner at Morteville on August the first. Will you inform the Court, Mr Dennison, as to the nature of your business in Morteville at that particular time?"

"I had no business there at all. I was on my way back from Paris to London."

"Ah! And what had been your business in Paris, Mr Dennison? Be careful."

"I decline answering the question."

"Were you in the company of the same lady with whom you visited Paris in January or February last?"

"I decline entering into my private affairs at all."

"Very well, sir," cried out Mr Slight, with sudden deadly animosity, "then there is one question which this Court will oblige you to answer, whether it suits your convenience or not. What was the nature of your conversation with Mr Gerald Durant on the morning you left Morteville?—the conversation you held together on the subject of Margaret Hall?"

Robert Dennison's face grew, if possible, a shade more livid. "I—I do not understand you," he stammered; but the moment's hesitation gave his brain time to work. Either Gerald had betrayed him, and fullest exposure was coming on, or Mr Slight was fencing with such weapons only as his client's half-confidence had supplied to him. In either case his quick presence of mind counselled him to answer with honesty. Could a lie have saved him he would have told it—yes, in the face of a hundred newly-uttered oaths; but the time, he knew, was gone for denial of any kind. Truth, plain and literal, was what he was reduced to now; and, boldly-faithful as he was boldly-false, Robert Dennison stood, the first momentary irresolution over, prepared to tell it.

As he stood thus—no abasement in his eyes, no tremble on his lips, no token of fear on all the iron face—Gerald felt that he admired Dennison as he had never admired him in his life before. Talk of pluck! why his own was nothing, for he was innocent. But here was a man guilty of actions which in every class of society are branded as infamous—betrayal of the woman who bore his name, darkest dishonour in allowing another man to abide the

consequences of his act; and, in a moment, for aught that he could know, the fair reputation he set such store upon might be spotted—fame, money, position, every dearest hope of his life, attainted. And he stood and waited for the blow thus! I repeat, Gerald in his heart admired him, as one admires the brutal heroes of the ring, for his sheer blind animal strength, unleavened though it was by any of the moral qualities which raise a nobler man's courage above the courage of a bull-dog. The stamina of the Durants was there, he thought. The poor fellow's inadequate sense of finer honour was to be credited more perhaps to the base admixture of Dennison blood than to any fault of his. *Bon sang ne peut pas mentir.* There was no virtue in *his* ever acting like a gentleman; but how can you expect a man without a grandfather to know how to conduct himself decently? When they were boys together, nice delicacy, even with respect to half-crowns, was, he remembered, the one thing he had never looked for in his roturier cousin. It was the same now. But the good blood showed in the fellow's face and attitude at this moment; and Gerald's heart, his fancy—what was it that fired so easily in that facile organization? warmed towards him.

"You don't understand me," said Mr Slight, "yet the question is a simple one. Can you remember the substance of the conversation that took place between you and your cousin on the morning of your leaving Morteville?"

"I can remember the general tenour of it, certainly," said Dennison, firmly. "The subject of Margaret Hall's continued disappearance was talked of, and I advised Mr Durant to return to England at once, and endeavour to prove his innocence in the matter. Suspicions had arisen as to his being the companion of the girl's flight, and I wished him to set himself right with his friends at once."

"And what was your cousin's answer to this excellent advice?"

"My cousin's answer was, that he had perfect confidence in his innocence eventually asserting itself. As for suspicions, he believed they had been very much stronger against myself than against him."

"To which you replied—"

"In words that I cannot consider it necessary to repeat here,"

said Dennison, with admirable audacity. "I decline, as I have observed, to enter at all upon my own personal affairs."

Mr Slight's eye-glass fell; and he shifted his ground a little.

"Have you ever stated your conviction to be that Gerald Durant was Margaret Hall's lover, and that you had good reasons for saying so?"

"Not in those words, certainly."

"Did you state once to Mr Sholto McIvor that you believed Gerald Durant had got into a mess with his uncle about Margaret Hall?"

"I may have said so. I don't recollect it."

"Have you endeavoured to set right the misunderstanding that you say existed between the prisoner and his uncle?"

"I have."

"Mr Dennison," with an abrupt emphasis that took every one in the court aback, "are you—failing the prisoner at the bar—Sir John Durant's next male heir?"

The inflection of Mr Slight's voice as he said this was something wonderful. Robert Dennison's heart stood still at the terse embodiment of his own guilty hopes which those few words, spoken in that tone, put before him. But rallying instantly, with thorough self-command, with a face of marble to the last, he answered coldly that he was not and never could be Sir John Durant's heir. And then—a sound, not exactly a hiss, but a sound decidedly the reverse of applause following him from the court—Mr Dennison was allowed to leave the witness-box, and poor little Sholto McIvor was called to take his place there.

At no time wise or eloquent, Sholto was, on this most memorable day of his life, a very monument of helpless, well-meaning, total imbecility. He contradicted himself; he made statements *à tort et à travers;* he remembered what he ought to have forgotten; forgot what he ought to have remembered; and was alternately browbeaten by the defence, reprimanded for contempt of court by the magistrate, and reminded of the stringency of the law against perjury by the prosecution. But bullied by the lawyers, and laughed at by the whole court, Gerald included, he succeeded in creating a stronger impression against the prisoner than any witness had yet done. ("Did your best to hang me," Gerald tells

him to this day.) He was so wholly, so palpably guileless, it was so evident that his sympathies were on the prisoner's side, that every admission wrung from him seemed to carry the kind of weight with it that men are prone to accord to the evidence of a child. The description of Gerald's manner and appearance when he entered his cousin's chambers; his altercation with Dennison; the "chaff" about some lady at Morteville; Gerald's voluntary admission that he had seen "the ghost of a Staffordshire face" on London Bridge; his unusual taciturnity as they drove home together to their lodgings in Clarges Street—every word that Sholto uttered told. And immense was the success of this part of the entertainment among the higher class of spectators. With a thermometer at ninety-six, and such air to breathe as a London police-court generates, the nerves require relaxation after three or four hours' heavy business, even with the prospect of seeing a guardsman committed to Newgate, to carry one's interest on.

When he had said his worst on the subject of the dinner-party, Sholto was questioned as to Gerald's money difficulties, and again did him simply as much damage as was possible. Hard up? Of course, Durant had always been deucedly hard up, like everybody else. First heard of his coolness with his uncle from Mr Dennison. What was it about? . . . Would like to know whose business that was. Well, then—the bench having sternly interfered—it was about a woman, this wretched, ridiculous milkwoman, Margaret Hall. What did Sir John Durant threaten? Why, to disinherit him, he supposed. Thought that was what "uncles and governors and that" always threatened. During the last three weeks Durant had come right with his people again. Knew it because he had written and asked him, Sholto, to be his best man at his approaching marriage with his cousin. Did they want any better proof than that?

After Sholto, appeared Mr Bennett; all his elegant language taken out of him, and covered with shame and contrition at having to appear against his master. He had very little to tell, and that little was terribly in favour of the prosecution. He returned with Mr Durant, on August the second, from a tour they had been making abroad; stopped a few days in Paris, and no lady was with his master then. Saw his master two or three

times in a lady's society at Morteville; she crossed to London in the Lord of the Isles with them. Saw that she wore a scarlet cloak during the latter part of the voyage; took up lunch to her and Mr Durant on the paddle-box, and got out one of his master's cambric handkerchiefs for the lady to tie round her head. Yes; the handkerchief shown him was the same; knew it by his master's monogram—called by Mr Bennett monograph. The hat produced was the kind of hat Mr Durant travelled in, but declined swearing to it. At the London Bridge station his master dismissed him with the luggage, and he left them standing there together, Mr Durant and the lady. His master returned home between one and two o'clock; one of the sides of his coat was much torn; he did not bring any hat home with him. Did not know the lady's name (this was in answer to Mr Slight). Had only lived with Mr Durant four months, and to the best of his belief never saw Margaret Hall in his life.

Then—the formal, official evidence of Mr Wickham having occupied a very few minutes only—it was announced that there would be a brief adjournment of the court, and that the case for the prosecution was closed.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

"HERE!"

Every one present detected a marked and significant change upon Mr Slight's face when the court reassembled, and whispers of good augur for the coming defence were at once passed about among the lawyers. It was already known how, immediately after the adjournment, Sir John Durant, accompanied by a young girl, had arrived and had an interview with Mr Slight; and how, on re-entering the court, Mr Slight had crossed at once to the dock and held an earnest whispered conversation with his client. It was remarked, how Gerald Durant's face flushed and paled as they spoke; how at first he had appeared eagerly to oppose some

proposition that was being made to him, afterwards—Mr Slight's expression brightening every moment—how an unwilling assent had evidently been wrung from his lips. And putting all these things together, an opinion of good omen for the prisoner was, as I have said, fast gaining ground in the court. Old Slight would not look so ridiculously pleased without solid cause. Some new and important evidence was probably coming to light, at the eleventh hour, for the defence.

The face of the lawyer for the Crown grew ominously long at the thought. As the case already stood, they had calculated upon getting it over, with half an hour or so to spare, before dinner-time. One witness more, on either side, might just make the difference of an adjournment till next day; above all, a witness of sufficient importance to make Slight look so foolishly excited. And, with a pathetic yearning for the twenty-four hours of blue Italian lake and pure Italian sky that he would be called upon to resign, Mr Sleek, like every person present in a state bordering on asphyxia, loosened his cravat, leant back with half-closed eyes in his seat, and prepared himself for the worst.

The first welcome sound that fell on his ear was an announcement that the address made on the prisoner's behalf would be a very brief one. It had never, of course, Mr Slight remarked, been his intention to assert that his client was innocent of the horrible crime laid to his charge. He had not been summoned to his present position to assert Mr Durant's innocence; innocence, according to all civilized laws, being a thing to be presumed—criminality never; and the burthen of proof, as it was unnecessary for him to say, resting always with the prosecution. In a case of purely circumstantial evidence like this, if the facts adduced were capable of solution upon any other hypothesis than the guilt of the accused, they must be discarded: nay, although the matter remained so wholly mysterious that no supposition save the prisoner's guilt could account for it, that supposition would not be basis sufficient on which to rest a judgment against him. Before committing Gerald Durant for trial for the murder of Margaret Hall, the bench must be as morally convinced, by the chain of evidence brought forward, that he was guilty, as though they

had seen him commit the act under their own eyes. That chain of evidence, he positively affirmed, had never existed; indeed, he did not hesitate to say that the counsel for the Crown were reversing every legal and customary mode of proceeding. Instead of proving a murder first and discovering the murderer afterwards, they were seeking first to prove the murderer and thence to deduce a murder! It had never, he repeated, been his intention to assert his client's innocence; but, until a quarter of an hour ago, he had certainly intended to point out, link by link, the palpable weakness of the attempt to prove his guilt: had meant to show how revolting to probability, how surrounded at every step with contradiction, was the presumption of a murder; while, on the other hand, if they yielded to the supposition of suicide, how every fact could at once be explained, naturally, and without distortion.

"The necessity for my doing this, however," cried Mr Slight, "is now happily removed. I have no longer to allude to the paucity of proof that a murder was ever committed at all; to the difficulty, I may say impossibility, of such an act of violence having taken place unobserved in one of the most crowded thoroughfares of London; to the discrepancy between the person of Mr Durant's companion and the person of the deceased; to mysterious circumstances respecting which a feeling of honour may have caused the prisoner's lips to be sealed. My esteemed friend who conducts the prosecution"—here he put up his eyeglass and took a glance at Mr Sleek's hot face—"has proved to us that a lady dressed in a scarlet travelling cloak did, on the second night of August, cross London Bridge with Mr Gerald Durant. This fact it is impossible for me to deny. But my esteemed friend also added that, with regard to this lady, he had a question to ask; a question which he knew must address itself with irresistible force to every person in the court—'Where is she?' And to this question," went on Mr Slight, speaking in a voice so distinct that not a syllable was lost throughout the whole silent crowd, "I have one brief and simple answer to make—Here! Here—waiting to be brought into the witness-box and to prove to the bench, with certainty unimpeachable, the innocence of the

accused! At twenty minutes past ten on the night of August the second, the death of Margaret Hall, according to the evidence of witnesses for the prosecution, took place. At twenty minutes past ten, Gerald Durant stood beside the lady whom I am now going to bring before you, on the platform of the South Eastern Railway, at London Bridge."

A smothered exclamation, half of approval, half of sheer stupefied surprise, burst from the crowd. Perhaps it would not be too much to say that an unacknowledged sense of disappointment did, for a moment, cross the minds of most of the spectators of the play: the kind of feeling people have when a fire is put out sooner than was expected, or when an impending fight ends unexpectedly in the combatants seeing their error and shaking hands. No one wanted Gerald Durant to be hung, or even committed, as far as he, poor fellow, was individually concerned. But every one who had fought his or her way into the court, every one who had gone through the heat and burthen of the day, did expect some good strong sensation as the reward of their sufferings. And the proving of an alibi—even with a young and pretty woman in the witness-box—could never be one half so sensational an incident as to see a handsome guardsman, the heir of an old unsullied name, committed for trial, and borne away to Newgate like any common felon.

This was the first feeling of the coarser crowd; but in one breast in that court a feeling, almost tragic in its intensity of disappointment, had arisen at Mr Slight's last words. Mr Wickham, his face unmoved as ever, was standing edgeways in one of the crowded entrances to the court, listening with the indifference engendered by long habit to the little stereotyped preamble about the certainty of the prisoner's innocence, when that one awfully distinct monosyllable, "Here," broke in upon his senses; and in a moment, mechanical though his attention had been, he recalled the drift of Mr Slight's whole address, and understood its meaning. The defence was going to prove an alibi. Mr Wickham in his inmost soul staggered as if he had got a deathstroke. An alibi! He was like a man to whom a flaw in his noblest belief, his dearest affection, has been unexpectedly discovered; like the *chef*

whose wounded spirit could not survive the disgrace of that one spoilt salmi! The London Bridge case had been the culminating triumph of Mr Wickham's life. He had received the compliments of those high in office, had awakened the jealousy of his peers, by the way in which he had worked that case up. The remembrance of it was to have been the solace of his superannuated years, an honourable heirloom to leave to his children after him. And here, in a moment, through some paltry miscalculation, some miserable lawyer's sleight-of-hand, his crown was to be wrested from him by an alibi. Any other defeat he thought he might have borne better, but—an alibi! An alibi, cooked up at the last; an alibi which, if established—and something on Mr Slight's face left little ground for hope that the defence was a sham—would turn the whole prosecution into a ridiculous mistake, and reduce the very name of Wickham into a reproach and a byword in the profession.

Circumstances unnecessary to dilate upon, proceeded Mr Slight's cheerful voice, had conspired together to hinder this most important witness for the defence from appearing until the last moment; and it was doubtless a painful reflection for the officers of the Crown to feel that, had a longer delay occurred, a committal condemning an innocent man to imprisonment, and casting a stigma upon a loyal and unspotted name, would have been the result of the spirit in which the prosecution has been conducted. Happily, providentially, all danger of this fearful injustice was past; and the welcome duty that now lay before the bench was the restoration of an honourable man, without suspicion, without the faintest stain of any kind upon his character, to his position and his friends.

A long low murmur, a murmur of intense, irrepressible excitement, passed for a minute or two through the court, then slowly the door of the witness-box opened, and a girl appeared there; a girl dressed in white, with long hair falling round her neck, with a child's freshness on her lips and in her eyes; the fairest apparition that had brightened those unlovely walls any time during the last five-and-twenty years at least. She moved a step or two forward, with the uncertain reeling movement of one who walks in his sleep, then shrank away against the side of the witness-box,

and—a frightful pallor gathering round her lips—looked with bewildered eyes about her.

"Your name?" said Mr Slight, unconsciously modulating his voice to the tone he would have used had he been seeking to reassure a very frightened child. "What is your name? Now take time to recover yourself."

She started and clasped her hands together, with the little foreign gesture so painfully familiar to the eyes of two men who were watching her in that court; but though her lips parted, no sound as yet reached the impatient ears of the crowd; and for the third time, with ever-increasing gentleness and encouragement, Mr Slight repeated his question.

Just at this moment a ray of sunshine struggled in through one of the high barred windows of the court, and falling, as it chanced, straight across the prisoner's dock, brought out, in fullest golden relief, the pale and eager face of Gerald Durant. At the sight of him a wonderful, sudden light rose in the girl's eyes. She stood a second or more motionless; a scarlet flood rushing across her cheeks and forehead; then stepped forward, and in a clear vibrating voice—a voice which for an instant touched the heart even of that police-court crowd—gave her answer:

"Archie Lovell."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

ARCHIE'S OVATION.

From the moment that she left the Euston Square Station until now, Archie Lovell had realized nothing of what was going on around her. The drive along the noisy city streets; the crowded entrance of the court; the room where she had had her interview with Mr Slight; the passages along which they had led her next; the door through which some voice had bade her pass; the moment when she found herself in that sickening atmosphere, before that

pale and surging mass of human faces :—of all this she had taken note accurately, as far as external detail went, but with no more vivid sense of its connection with herself than if it had been the shifting, unreal background of a dream. Until the moment when she saw Gerald, it seemed as though some one else were really acting out for her the final scene of her sacrifice, and as though she were being carried blindly along in it, a mere passive, stupefied spectator. Then in one sudden, mighty wave, swept back across her brain the meaning, the purpose, the present shame, the future penalty, of all this that she was doing. She was neither dreaming nor at play—the two states that had compassed every act of her little life till now. An innocent man was standing before her, charged with a crime from which, no matter at what price, her duty was to save him; and she had got to speak the truth—this Mr Slight had told her—nothing but the truth, and to fear no one, not even the magistrate upon the bench, but answer soberly and faithfully whatever questions were put to her. She clenched her fingers firmly upon the palms of her hands; held her breath tight; felt herself blinded by a dark red mist that for a second swam before her sight; then rallied every faculty she possessed in one desperate effort, and told her name. After this Mr Slight at once began her examination, and throughout it all she kept her head erect and spoke out clear, cool, and undaunted, just as she had spoken when she was eleven years old, saving Tino from Bettina's wrath. The sea of faces before which she had shrunk with the mere animal terror that overcomes any one for the first time confronting a crowd, seemed to lessen and fade away, and in its place she saw two faces only; Mr Slight's, who questioned her, and Gerald's—his whom she was here to save. What was there to make her fear or falter now?

She was seventeen on the twelfth of last October. Her father was the Honourable Frederick Lovell, Rector of Hatton, in Staffordshire. First knew Mr Durant about four weeks ago, in Morteville-sur-Mer. "I met him a few times on the Grève, and went to a ball, and danced with him; I think I knew him very well. On the second of August Mr Durant left Morteville, and I went down on the pier to see him off. Papa and Bettina were

away from home, and the servant too, and no one knew I went. I wanted to see a steamer, and asked Mr Durant to take me on board with him. He took me, and the boatman was stupid and left me there, and before we knew where we were the steamer had started, and the captain wouldn't stop. Mr Durant was very sorry about it, and said I should land at Calais, and get back by another boat to Morteville; but when we reached Calais, there were a number of people I knew standing on the pier, and I was ashamed to land among them—so we came on to London. It wasn't Mr Durant's fault more than mine. I ought to have landed at Calais, but I was ashamed . . . at all events, we went on! I liked being at sea. I liked being with Mr Durant—*ecco!* The wind was fresh going across, and a lady on deck lent me her cloak. It was a scarlet cloak; I should know it if I saw it again. Yes," after examining the cloak which was handed to her, "this is the same. It is changed in colour, I think; it looks as if it had been in the water. When we got to London I was confused in the great crowd, and forgot to return the cloak—I meant no robbery, I only forgot it. We went to a station, Mr Durant and I, and had some tea; then he took me for a walk on London Bridge. Mr Durant asked me to drive with him and see the streets, but I was afraid there wouldn't be time before the train left, so we walked instead. I was to go back to Folkestone by the half-past ten train. When we were on the bridge, a crowd got round us, and in the *zuffa* I lost Mr Durant's arm. Some men molested me because I spoke Italian, I think, and Mr Durant knocked one of them down. The man bled and looked hurt, and then Mr Durant's coat got torn, and his hat was lost. It was a peaked hat, such as I have seen the peasants wear in the Tyrol. The hat you show me is like it—how can I swear it is the same?—it is like it. Then came the polizia—police, you say—and sent the crowd away. One of the police stopped and looked at Mr Durant and me. He said nothing, but he looked at us hard. Am I to know if he saw my face? We walked on over the bridge and crossed, so as to see the other side of London, on our way back. As we came, I saw a woman in one of the little *angoli* on the bridge. Recesses? well, then, in one of the recesses. She was

thinly dressed, and was sitting with her head leaning against the wall. I thought she was ill, and asked Mr Durant to let me give her the cloak. I don't say that it was out of kindness, it was, chiefly, I think because I wanted to get rid of the cloak—I should have been ashamed to land in it at Morteville. Mr Durant said no, I shouldn't give it her, but I had my way, and went up and spoke to the woman. I saw her face, plain. Mr Durant stood a few steps away. I can't tell whether he saw her—I should think not—he may have had a glimpse of her . . . I would rather you asked me questions about myself! She was young, and good looking—about twenty, perhaps, with pale skin, and black hair and eyebrows. I remember her quite well. I saw her hands: they did not look like a lady's hands. I asked her if she would take the cloak, and when she didn't speak, I put it round her and fastened it at the throat. She tried to answer then, but there was something thick and strange about the way she spoke, and I did not understand her. I don't know what was the matter with her —how should I? I believe I left a handkerchief of Mr Durant's in the pocket of the cloak. The handkerchief you show me is exactly like it: I tell by the *batiste*, and the lilac stitching round the letters. I can't swear that it is the same: a whole set of handkerchiefs might be marked the same. Just after we were walking on again, the clocks in London struck one—that was a quarter-past ten, Mr Durant told me, and we must get on quick. The train I went by left at half-past ten, and Mr Durant stayed by the carriage where I was till the last. I heard no clocks strike: I heard the conductor say we were five minutes behind our time. Then I went away home. I got to Morteville very early in the morning, and no one I knew, except Captain Waters, saw me land on the pier. Papa did not return home till the middle of the day. I have never told him anything about my going to London. I told my stepmother about it the same afternoon, and she said I must never talk of it to any one. I never should have told, but for this: when Mr Durant was first taken up, I did not mean to tell. I don't know whether I thought he would get clear without me: I know I did not mean to tell. I was at Durant's Court when some one came to take him to London, and Mr Durant told

me then to keep silent, whatever happened, and he would never betray me. I had not made up my mind to tell till last night. I don't know what decided me. I never spoke to Bettina, or to papa about coming. Mr Gerald Durant is engaged to marry his cousin Lucia. He was never engaged to me. No; it is certainly not for Miss Durant's sake that I have told the truth: I care very little about her . . . I cannot answer you. I don't know why I have told it."

And here Mr Slight stopped; and, by order of the magistrate, Mrs Dawson was recalled into the witness-box.

At the sight of the girl who stood there—the resurrection, as it seemed to her, of the dead—dressed exactly as she had seen her that day, on the deck of the Lord of the Isles, Mrs Dawson gave a start and a half-scream that, before she had uttered a word, bore incontestable evidence to the truth of all Archie Lovell had said. Did she know the young lady at her side? Ay, indeed she did: could not be surer if it was her own daughter she had to answer to. This was Mr Durant's companion—the girl to whom she lent the cloak on board the steamer. Would swear most positively to it on oath. It was not a face likely to be forgotten. Told the Court in her evidence—with a look of triumph at both lawyers—that the young lady had light brown hair and blue eyes. Could not help it if she had been "that cross-questioned and mortified" at the time, as to make her hardly know herself which way she was swearing. Mr Slight now wrote something on a slip of paper, which was handed by one of the officers of the court to the magistrate; and a minute or two later—Archie standing there still—"Mr Edward Randall" was re-summoned to take his place in the witness-box.

If ever a man on earth was placed in a position likely to end in a committal for perjury, it was Captain Waters at this moment: and he read his danger at a glance. His threats to Archie, the anonymous bribe to silence that he had accepted, the truths which two hours before he had in this court suppressed—every detail of his situation came clear before his mind with his first hurried look at Archie Lovell's face. Some melodramatic outburst of generosity had brought the girl forward after all; and (following the law by which innocence and virtue are ever trampled upon in this

world) he was to be the sufferer. And he put up his eye-glass calmly; stroked down his blonde moustache with his delicate, paste-decked fingers, and looked round at the magistrate, lawyers, and the rest, just in the same quiet, unmoved way with which he was accustomed to read the faces of the adversary, and the adversary's gallery at écarté. He had not much to lose—even in such a moment as this the thought crossed Waters' mind. To some men, a conviction for perjury might be the loss of friends, reputation, ambition, money: to him it would be—what? Not even the loss which, to his judgment, seemed immeasurably the most important in the scale, money. Imprisonment cost one nothing, and was no greater bore than liberty; nay, as he knew from experience, it sent a man back, sometimes, with nerves strengthened by early hours and abstinence from tobacco, to the accustomed duties of his life. If the worst came to the worst, he would still, at the end of a few months, more or less, be the exact amount of money which he had received from Gerald Durant to the good. The game had been well played; and, whether the last deal went against him or not, he had the calm assurance of his own conscience to tell him that he had reckoned up the odds with accuracy.

And he came admirably through it all! Came through it as it is very doubtful that a better man would have done. Perhaps the season of the year, and the unparalleled heat of this particular day, may have been the chosen instruments by which the gods of Captain Waters' faith saw fit to deliver him. With a city court-house at ninety-six, in August, few magistrates or lawyers would seek to protract their own suffering by probing the exactitude of a comparatively unimportant witness too narrowly. Skimming lightly, and with delicate adroitness, over the Calais episode, Mr Slight extracted an admission from the witness, that he had seen Miss Lovell, the young lady who stood beside him now, land alone at Morteville, on the morning of August the third. And after this, without a word of cross-examination, Captain Waters passed away out of the witness-box, passed away, too, for ever out of the record of Archie Lovell's life.

[That I may not have to stain the last and fairest chapter of my

story by the mention of him, I will say here that he was seen last autumn at Homburg; a jewelled chevalier of industry no longer, but one of the scantily-paid servants of the public tables; in which capacity—unless ill-health should chance to bring him lower still—his life will probably be passed. Paralysis, the Nemesis of such men, seized Waters within a few months of the day of Gerald's trial; and taking from him nerve, memory, power of combination—the mental stock-in-trade of his craft—left him just bodily strength enough to fulfil the duties of a croupier. Ralph Seton was the man who saw him thus at Homburg; and at the pitying request of a soft voice at his side, managed to slip a napoleon or two into the sickly attenuated hand, not engaged at the moment with the professional rateau: a kindness which, coming from the source it did, made something very like tears rise into the poor wretch's eyes. "And which shows he is not altogether worthless," the soft voice said to Ralph, when they came out from the crowded Kur Saal into the blue German night. "No man, unless he had some good left in him, would be touched by a kindness!" A purely womanly inference, which Ralph would not for worlds have shattered by remarking how a scoundrel brought, by smoking and alcohol, to the state of Waters, will shed tears of maudlin gratitude over your charity at one moment, and betray or revile the hand that has assisted him at the next!]

The examination was virtually over. Already the crowd was beginning to move; already the lawyers for the crown, and for the defence, indifferently, were congratulating each other, with brightened faces, upon the termination in one day of the inquiry. In a few emphatic words, the magistrate then pronounced the discharge of the prisoner, "without a blot, or the suspicion of a blot, upon his honour:" and almost before Archie Lovell, confused and faint, had left the witness-box, a prolonged irrepressible outburst of applause from the court, told her that the work she had set herself to do was accomplished—Gerald Durant free.

In performing any act heroic to ourselves we are apt to gauge the effect it will produce on others by the effect that it produces on our own imagination beforehand. That her future life was to be irrevocably darkened, Archie had never doubted; but that, in

the first hour of her victory over self, men would appreciate her heroism she had felt equally sure. In what form this hero-worship would be laid at her feet she had not speculated; she had felt only that it *must* be accorded to her. What was the triumph that she met with in reality? Flushed, weary, bewildered, she found herself, after traversing a dark noisome room or two, with the other discharged witnesses, among the crowd—such a crowd as only a disgorging London court can show; a crowd of sallow-faced men and women, whose jokes defiled her ears, whose touch was abhorrent to her; men and women bandying vile police-court jests together, and to whose lips her own name—with what a shudder she heard it there!—was already familiar. Her heart died within her; she shrank back against the black, polluted wall nearest to which she stood, and pulled her veil down over her face. This was her reward, she felt. She had sacrificed the happiness of her whole life freely, and even in this first moment after the accomplishment of the sacrifice, was forgotten. Gerald, Sir John Durant, Ralph Seton, were thinking, joyfully no doubt, of the cause that had been won; and she who had won it was standing here alone—a thousand times worse than alone: was standing among a coarse and cruel crowd, in her shame!

Just at this moment a kind voice whispered in her ear, a friendly hand took hold of hers, and drew it within the shelter of a stalwart, untrembling arm.

"Keep along with me, my dear, and you'll be all right. There's my cousin 'Melia's husband waiting for me down by the steps—the little man with the black hatband—and he'll get us into a cab, and see us to the station comfortable, if so be that you don't mind riding with us under the circumstances."

It was not Gerald, it was not Ralph, but the homely farmer's wife from Heathcotes who had been the first to come to her succour. With the timely aid of 'Melia's husband they struggled their way at last through the crowd; and just as Gerald was leaving the court, his friends pressing round to shake his hand and congratulate him, the poor little heroine of the day, more dead than living, was being driven from its door, with the yells and laughter and brutal jokes of the mob for her ovation.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

IN THE DARK HOUR.

Of all the conflicting emotions called into play by the unexpected ending of Gerald Durant's examination—from the childish, tearful delight of poor old Sir John, down to the blank professional disappointment of Inspector Wickham, the emotions of Robert Dennison would be, perhaps, the hardest of analysis.

Paradoxical though it may sound, his first sensation was one of positive relief. Was a lurking, human remorse towards Gerald the cause of this? had his quick brain foreseen fresh combinations of possible danger to himself in the event of his cousin's committal? or was it simply the physical reaction which good and bad human creatures alike are sensible of when, after acute mental tension, the end comes, and suspense, at least, is over? Robert Dennison himself could scarcely have answered this as he left the police-court, leaning back out of men's sight in the corner of his cab, and screening away with his hand the bright evening sunshine from his eyes. All he knew was that he felt relieved! that he had exchanged the pestilential air of the court and witness-room for the purer one of the streets, and was returning home now to change his dress, and take his bath before dinner. And then it first occurred to him that he had not swallowed food to-day; had scarcely eaten, had never slept an hour of wholesome sleep during the past week; and with a childish interest, very unlike himself, Mr Dennison fell to wondering whether he would dine well this evening, and on what dishes? and whether, if he went to bed early—by eleven or twelve o'clock, say—there would be a chance of his getting a good night's rest at last? A worn-out brain and empty stomach seldom admit of much grandiloquence in our thoughts or in our sufferings just at first.

He got home, took a couple of glasses of sherry, dressed, went out, and dined; and by eight o'clock had returned to his chambers, and was sitting by that window where he had sat and watched the river on the morning after Maggie's death; the window from whence he had heard the children's voices at the moment when

he was nerving himself to look over and destroy the last mute mementos of his dead love for her. Had his love been ever utterly and indeed dead? he asked himself; for now that mere animal exhaustion was passed, memory and remorse had arisen, like giants refreshed, to torture him again. His passionate fancy for her had cooled, of course, as all fancies for beautiful toys cool in possession; and he had wronged her cruelly, and her death, however men might think, lay (and his heart knew it!) at his door. But love—had he not in truth loved her? Would he not at this moment give up years of life could he but feel the warm hand still in his, but see the faithful womanly face looking, as it used to look, in perfect, blissful, slavish contentment up to his? Something within his heart cried yes. Loss of friends and reputation here in England; alienation from his uncle and his uncle's money; the uphill prospect of making himself another name elsewhere, all these seemed as nothing to him now. In this hour, this first hour of what he knew was to be in some measure a new life—the common human nature of the man, the weakness on all exemption from which he was wont to pride himself, sheer craving desire for sympathy in his desolation, overcame him. The dark heart, as in Herod of old, bled for what it had destroyed; cried out, with vain and passionate regret, for the love that it had murdered.

He had a cigar between his lips when he first placed himself at the window, but it burnt out, and it did not seem to occur to him to light it, or to take another. His servant, as usual, had placed some wine and brandy on the table at his master's side; but Dennison drank nothing. Stimulants, taken even in a quantity that would have set most men's brains perforce to rest, would but have stimulated his to keener thought; and he had the wisdom to abstain from them. God knows he needed no sharpening of his faculties! needed no whetstone for his remorse—no new vividness added to the pictured face that, white and haggard, and with wan, beseeching eyes, seemed to stand before him everywhere—everywhere, in the waning twilight!

It was his first hour of pure, concentrated suffering since Maggie's death, for dread of suspicion resting on himself at first, anxiety later in the result of Gerald's trial, had until now held every other motive in abeyance; and he suffered, as he did most

things, with his might, with brains! Good, diffuse, kindly natures, prone to bleed a dozen times a week, can, perhaps, hardly estimate to what extent an intensely selfish man like this softens when three or four times in a life the flinty heart is smitten, and the floodgates of the soul are loosed.

A little after nine came a ring at his chambers door. The boy, in obedience to his master's commands, told the visitor, whose face he did not by this light distinguish, that Mr Dennison had business, and could not be disturbed.

"Mr Dennison will see me, Andrew," answered a voice, cheerfully, a voice that Robert Dennison, even through the closed doors, had heard and recognized in a moment. Immediately afterwards a well-known step—with triumph, hope, light-heartedness, Dennison felt bitterly, in its tread—came along the passage, and Gerald Durant, unannounced, walked into his room, and up to his side.

"Congratulate me, Robert!" he said, taking hold of his cousin's hand, and grasping it heartily, whether Dennison willed it or not. "Things have gone better than could have been hoped for with every one, after all."

"Well, that depends upon whom you mean by 'every one,'" said Dennison, in his coldest voice, and freeing his hand abruptly from Gerald's warm grasp. "Does 'every one' mean you, or the little girl who came forward to save you? Scarcely her, I suppose?"

"I did not mean her, certainly, Robert, but even with Miss Lovell things have, in one sense, gone well. To a noble nature like hers the exposure of to-day is, I verily believe, better than living through a life of hypocrisy, as the poor little thing must have done if she hadn't had the courage to come forward, and speak the truth."

Robert Dennison laughed: the old cynical laugh with which he was accustomed to receive any of what he called Gerald's heroics. "Noble nature, hypocrisy, courage! What fine words you always have at command, Gerald! How charmingly clear it always is to you that every woman must be right in sacrificing herself for the *beaux yeux* of Mr Gerald Durant! I need scarcely ask," he added, "how Miss Lovell's heroism, nobility, and courage will be rewarded? With her name compromised as it is, I need scarcely

ask if you mean to give up Lucia—fifty thousand pounds and all—and make Miss Lovell your wife?"

At the tone of Robert Dennison's voice, at the cold reception that it was evident he intentionally gave him, Gerald moved a step or two away from his side; and leaning his arm up against the wall beside the window, turned his face slightly from his cousin. As he stood thus, the graceful profile of his head and face showed, in clear silhouette, against the pure grey of the evening sky; and Dennison felt how he hated, how he abhorred, its beauty! He had never loved Gerald from the moment of his birth. As a child, a boy, a man, he had been jealous of every good thing which had been accorded to this easy, careless, unambitious nature, and denied to himself; but he had never positively loathed him until this moment. For now Gerald had committed the one offence which, to a heart like Dennison's, is beyond forgiveness: had treated him with generosity!

"You don't answer, Gerald. I suppose my question about Miss Lovell was an indiscreet one for me to ask, eh?"

"It certainly is not the subject which I came here to speak about," answered Gerald; "but if you really care to have an answer, I'll give it you in two words. Miss Lovell"—with a sort of effort he brought this out—"will never be my wife!"

"Ah, so I thought. The honour of having saved you must be her reward! We will speak no more of her. And what is the subject, then, as love matters are too sacred for us to handle, to which I am indebted for the pleasure of seeing you?"

Dennison's tone and manner were unmistakably those of a man determined to quarrel; but Gerald kept his temper admirably. Incapable though he was of thoroughly fathoming the depths of that sombre nature, he knew enough of it to sympathize with the miserable position of humiliated pride in which Dennison at this hour must feel himself to stand; and pitied him from his heart.

"There is much to be said between us, Robert, and—and I thought it might be as well got over to-night. If you don't care to be disturbed, though, I can go away, and come another time."

"No, no," interrupted Dennison, brusquely. "No other time for me, thank you. I know pretty well what you've come here

about, and I'd rather have it out at once. 'After the late painful circumstances, the honour of the Durants, of Mr Gerald Durant especially, requires a more complete vindication. Sooner than sully the honour of his family, and the sacredness of his own word, he did not betray the secret of a certain ill-born cousin of his, when by betraying it he could have insured his own safety. What he now demands is that this plebeian connection shall betray himself, and, having named his price for doing so, engage to go quietly out of the country, and disturb the peace and honour of his family no more.' Curse it—speak out, can't you!" he exclaimed, with sullen passion, as Gerald continued silent. "You know your lesson, and I'm sure I've made it easy enough for you to say."

Then Gerald turned round, and faced Dennison full. "I don't think that I deserve this tone from you, Robert; upon my soul, I don't! I've kept pretty staunch to you throughout, as you know, and what I want now is, that everything that *must* be said between us should be said in a friendly spirit: said as it ought to be," he added, kindly, "between two men brought up, as we were, to look upon each other as brothers."

"Afterwards! You can suppose all this sort of preamble said, please. Afterwards! What is it that you want from me? What has brought you here now?"

And thus forced to use plain language; seeing, too, the temper of the man he had to deal with—but still with hesitation, still in the softest, most generous, words that he could choose—Gerald spoke. Up to this moment he had not mentioned to any living man one word of his cousin's marriage; but the time had come when, for other interests as well as his own, it was simply just that the truth should be made known: not publicly, of necessity, but among themselves—to Sir John and Lady Durant, and to Lucia. He thought he had a right to demand this; and in return undertook to promise that no estrangement between Dennison and any member of the family should be the result. "You've suffered bitterly enough already, Robert," he finished, his voice trembling with earnestness; "and among all of us who care for you, the past shall be as much dead as though it had never been. The only brains we have among us are in your head, and if you want anything that Sir John's interest could do, I know right well—"

"If anything that Sir John's interest could do," interrupted Dennison, slowly and distinctly; "if—if anything that the interest of every Durant who ever lived could do, was put before me at this instant, I should refuse it. Family interest, family name, honour, money, are for you. I wish you joy of them. Do you think I can't foresee all your delightful future life?" he added, with cutting irony. "Married to Lucia, and bored to death by her; taking a row of Lucia's children to church, to set a good example in your parish; cringing to constituents; yawning through debates in the House, about which you know nothing, and for which you care less; increasing domination of your wife, port wine, gout, and a place in the family vault! This, my poor Gerald, will be your life, and it will suit you. Only don't think I wish to encroach upon any of the prerogatives that are yours by birthright."

But still no sarcasm rose to Gerald's lips; no taunt as to how Robert Dennison *had* once desired these things, and had failed in the attainment of them. Men speak strongly about the things for which they care in earnest. Money, respectability, a seat in Parliament, would (could he have possessed them) have been Dennison's gods; and their forfeiture fired him into passion. The prospect of inheriting them all touched Gerald Durant with no thrill of pleasure whatsoever. A dinner in good company at the *Maison Dorée;* a hard run, well mounted; a voice like Patti's; a pair of blue eyes like Archie Lovell's: these were the only things in life that his pleasure-loving nature ever coveted, and in his heart there was not one feeling of exultation over his approaching good fortune or of anger against Robert for his depreciation of it. Nay, in his heart, were the very truth told, he half envied his roturier cousin at this moment—for he was free, still!

"And what are your prospects then, Robert? After the delightful sketch you have given of my life—for which I am so well suited—it is fair, I think, that you should give me a fellow-picture of your own. You are not going to marry your first cousin, certainly, but in what other respects will your life be so very much freer from the common bore and weariness of living than mine?"

"Simply in this—and to you, perhaps, the words contain less meaning than they do to me: I shall be my own master! The

bread that my own right hand earns for me I shall eat, unembittered by the thought that I have sold my life and manhood to buy it. You understand?"

"I hear you."

"As to my prospects, they can be told in a few words—joyful words for you to bear to Durant's Court to-morrow, or whenever you go there next! In a fortnight I shall have left England, and all of you, for ever."

"Left England? Robert, this is madness—the mere overwrought feeling of the moment."

"It is nothing of the kind," interrupted Dennison, curtly. "Months ago I knew that there was an opening for me in Melbourne, and it suits my convenience now to accept it. 'Tis no place of honour, Gerald," he added, with a bitterness of tone impossible to dissemble. "No post that any of the family will care to boast a relation, unhappily near to them in blood, fills! One of the contributors to the principal Melbourne paper was killed in a street-quarrel a few months ago, and the editor sent an offer to the writer of certain articles in one of the London reviews to replace him. That writer was myself. Now you know my prospects, and also how very unprofitable even the highest county interest would be to me for the future! No, thank you," for Gerald was about, eagerly, to speak; "I don't even want money. A couple of flannel shirts, a coat, revolver, and bowie-knife, are about as much as a Melbourne penny-a-liner need possess! If I'm not stabbed, like my predecessor, I haven't much doubt about earning money enough to live upon, and if I am—at least I shan't lie under the weight of family marble, and have the charity children hired to walk, two and two, and whine over me at my funeral! But that difference is one of degree rather than of kind, and it will be but a matter of a few years whether you, in the tomb of all the Durants, or I in a nameless grave, in a Melbourne burial-ground, are fertilizing the ground again! Now, have you anything more to say? I ought, I dare say, to make speeches about the occurrences of the last few days, but really I see no object to be fulfilled by doing so. You have acted—like a Durant, let us say, and I like a Dennison! No words to you can

be stronger. But, gentleman or blackguard, our paths for the future at all events lie apart." And he rose, and with cold and not undignified stateliness moved a step or two in the direction of the door.

Faithful, generous, true as he had been throughout, Gerald Durant did yet at this moment feel wonderfully small in his own estimation. When you have come to befriend, to forgive a man who has wronged you, under his own roof, and he tells you boldly that he is a blackguard—if you like to think him so—but desires nothing either from your forgiveness or your friendship, it is not an easy thing to retreat from the scene with a very thorough sense of your own dignity!

"I shall remember you always as the nearest relation I have, Robert. All our present feelings will soften some day, and then—"

"Then, perhaps, Robert Dennison will come to his senses and be glad, at whatever price is bid, to offer the reparation he owes to the wounded family honour. Robert Dennison will do nothing of the sort. He gives you freely, now, the information you have come here to seek. On the tenth of January last Robert Dennison was married to Margaret Hall at the church of St Ethelburga, in the city, and you—are freed from your promise! You may get a certificate of the marriage—it is my wish that you should do so—and take it with you to Durant's Court to-morrow. Has more to be said?" for Gerald lingered uneasily yet. "You have got Lucia, and I—have lost—"

His voice died: he turned, walked across to the window, and there, through blinding mists, stood looking out at the river, black and desolate to him now as it had been to Maggie on that night when she fled from the girl's song, and from her own last hopes of love and of life, down the narrow city street!

And so—alone in the dark hour of retribution—Gerald left him.

CHAPTER XL.

"ADVIENNE QUE POURRA!"

That evening, close to suffocation in the hot heart of London, was fresh, as early autumn evenings are after rain, in the green stillness of the far-away Staffordshire fields.

When Archie Lovell had bade good-bye to her companion at the Hatton Station, and was walking slowly homeward through the sinking light, it seemed to her that trees had never looked so green, nor meadows smelt so sweet, as on this evening; and greenness and freshness both smote upon her heart with an unutterable sense of pain! What, the world had not changed a bit, then, only her life? The trees were ready with their friendly shelter, the fields with their thousand odours, for all the lives that could enjoy them still! for young girls with their companions; for lovers whispering in the twilight; for all bright and joyous lives—lives undarkened by shame, loveless and alone as hers would be!

As she walked along she pictured drearily to herself how the remainder of this dreary week would pass. To-day was Wednesday; three days to drag through before she must put on her new bonnet, and best dress, and go to the village church for all the people to gaze at her! To look forward to the end of life itself could scarcely have seemed longer than to look forward these three days. After Sunday she thought it would be different. When all the parish people, when the Durants and Major Seton had seen her, and said and thought their worst, she might brave her altered condition better. The newness of the shame would wear even from her father's heart in time; and people after nine days would tire of talking of her—this consolation Mrs Sherborne had offered during the journey—and she would set herself regular tasks of work; and so get through the hours, perhaps.

After Sunday. But how bear the intolerable weight of the three intervening days? how bear the silent misery of her father's face? how endure Bettina's loud reproaches, and the silent wonder

of the servants? Next week, it seemed to her, she would be old in suffering—callous, hardened. If she could but shirk the present—crouch down her head in some dark corner where no eye should see her, and wake and find the thing told—half of the nine days' wonder over! and then, with a blank, dead sensation, almost like a physical pain, the knowledge fell full upon her of how she had no choice whatever in the matter, but must bear *all* —the first hot shame, the fevered excitement of notoriety, the dull passing away into oblivion and contempt: all. The whole harvest which her folly had sown: her self-sacrifice and her generosity garnered in for her. Was truth such a much finer and nobler thing than falsehood? she asked herself. And the only answer her heart gave was, that while she was telling falsehood she had been tolerably happy; and now that she had told the truth she was intolerably miserable. In her heroic moments, as she was travelling up to London this morning, she had thought, "I shall be Archie Wilson, the Bohemian, again, after to-day. When everything is known, my conscience will have got back its freedom, whatever else I lose." And everything was known, and she was not Archie Wilson, the Bohemian, at all. She was a Philistine, heart and soul: a Philistine yearning bitterly after the good, solid things of life—the peace, the honour, the repute, which her own rash generosity had robbed her of.

All was peaceful and at rest when she reached home: the purple twilight closing round the little parsonage, the birds twittering to each other yet among the garden-trees, the rain washed china-roses smelling sweet around the porch: all peaceful and at rest in the quiet country home upon which the knowledge of her story was about to bring shame and desolation. With a beating heart she walked to the parlour-door, opened it, and found Bettina seated alone there at her tea, her bonnet still on—the strings turned back over her shoulders—her face heated, and with one candle, as if in ostentatious economy, to light her at her repast.

"Where's papa?" said Archie, bluntly; and walking up to the table, she looked steadily into her stepmother's face.

Mrs Lovell turned down the corners of her mouth, and pushed a couple of plates from her with a gesture of repugnance. They

contained the remains of an excellent high tea; cold chicken bones, a look as of salad upon one; a large piece of home-baked cake, butter, and a suspicion of marmalade on the other. But nothing exasperated Bettina so much as the imputation of being able to swallow food when she was alone or in adversity.

"Don't ask me where your father is, Archie! At Major Seton's, no doubt, talking of his bronzes, and his clocks, and his Madame Pompadours—a very nice subject for a minister of the gospel!—and leaving me to work the precious cure of souls . . . beard that vile woman, and then be insulted by my own turn-coat party in a public vestry, and when they tantamount to promised me sixteen votes last night! But I've done my best," added Bettina, with rising choler. "I've tried to start things as they should be started in the parish, and now your father may do the rest. Only don't ask me where he is. I wash my hands of everything to do with the parish and when he ought to have been at my side, supporting me. Nine hours with only a cracknel, and now the sight of food makes me sick!" And she pushed the plates, virtuously, a couple of inches further on the table.

Parochial victory had, after all, not fallen into the hands Mrs Lovell intended. Mrs Brown, the surgeon's wife, had certainly been ousted, mainly through Bettina's exertions, from the place of power; but at the eleventh hour a base coalition had arisen, by which old Miss Smith, the miller's sister, had been put into her place. On that memorable thirteenth of June, when Pitt declared to the thunderstruck House that he should vote in favour of Mr Fox, a greater blank could scarcely have overcome the hearts of Warren Hastings' followers, than had overcome Mrs Lovell when before eighteen ladies in the vestry the leader of her own party had announced her intention of supporting the miller's sister, *vice* Mrs Brown deposed. The barrenness of human ambitions—the frailty of human alliances—was laid bare before her heart in that hour; and the continued absence of her husband and stepdaughter, on her return home, had worked her wounded spirit up to the last point of irritation. Archie saw that it was so with relief. Kind words, gentleness, were, she knew, what would be too much for her bursting heart now; and, seating herself at the

table, she cut off a slice of bread, and asked Bettina, in a voice that she tried to make like her usual one, for tea. "You—you don't ask after my news," she stammered, after some moments had passed in silence. "Have you heard—"

"I have heard nothing," interrupted Mrs Lovell, hotly, and I don't wish to hear. No news is ever of any good to us."

"Mr Durant is free, Bettina, that is all. I thought perhaps you might be glad to know it."

"I am not glad. I want to hear nothing about the Durants;" and Bettina, burning in her very soul with curiosity, got up with dignity from the table. "I have no further interest in anything connected with this parish. As Mr Durant is in possession of the clue to our dishonour you need scarcely tell me that he will return to the neighbourhood! To-day I should say would be about the last time you will ever be invited to the Court—for, although you have not the civility to tell me, I conclude that is where you have spent the day. Nothing but this scrape of his own has, I am convinced, kept the young man silent so long. Good-night to you, Archie, and when your father *does* return let him know that, worn out with fatigue and trouble, I have retired to my rest."

"But, Bettina, I want to tell you—"

"I will hear nothing to-night, Archie. Peace and quiet, not frivolous worldly talk, are what I stand in need of now!"

And blind to the white wan face, the hollow eyes that were pleading to her to stay, Mrs Lovell went off at once to her room, shutting the door immediately afterwards with the peculiar sharp energy which always warned the other members of the household when any lengthened course of meditation was in prospect.

So to her father alone the first hard confession would have to be made! if indeed some blackened, distorted version of the story Mrs Sherborne had brought down from London had not already reached his ears. She lingered over the tea-table; absently, and without hunger, eating a mouthful or two of bread until the servant came in to clear the things; then, nervously dreading lest the girl should watch her too closely, went out of doors and with heavy limbs dragged herself to the same spot at the boundary of the orchard where she had parted from Ralph last night.

She would rest herself here, she thought, till she heard her father's step at the garden-gate; then go boldly to him, and while he kissed her, while he held her in his arms, sob out to him the story of her shame! It would be easier so perhaps, after all! easier with no one to come between her prayers and his forgiveness! easier with the darkness screening away the horrible suffering that she shrank from having to look at on his face!

It was nearly ten o'clock before Mr Lovell returned home. Archie started up eagerly at the sound of his well-known step upon the gravel; then sank back, with sickening terror, into her seat. Her father was not alone; and the voice that was talking to him in those low but earnest tones was Major Seton's. Then all was told and over! How the time that followed passed she never knew; or whether minutes or hours went by in the kind of deathly swoon into which her heart fell. What she distinctly knew, what she distinctly remembers next, was Major Seton being at her side, speaking very gently to her, and with tender care wrapping something warm around her chilled frame.

"Margaret told us you were out here still, and your father made me bring this—his own thick plaid—and faithfully promise to wrap you in it. I have not suffocated you quite, have I, Archie?"

"Does—does papa know?" was all she could falter: and her head sank forward on her breast.

"Yes, Archie, he knows everything," said Major Seton. "You must not be angry with me for telling him first, but I met him returning from the village, as I walked up from the station, and the temptation to be the bearer of the good news was too strong for me. Why did you run away from us all?" he added, taking her cold, pulseless hand into his. "We all wanted to be your escort from the police-court, old Sir John, Gerald, and I—and found you flown. If you had waited to come by the express, as I did, you see you would have got home very nearly as soon, and have had me as your companion on your journey."

"I—I never thought that you would remember me! I thought every one would be thinking of Mr Durant alone! Major Seton," raising her face—deathly pale, even in that dim light, he saw it

was; and in its pallor loved it more than he had ever loved it in its bloom—"are you sure that you have told him all?"

"I have told him *all*, Archie. Your father knows every word of the story now; knows how true to herself his daughter has been at last—how brave, how faithful—"

"Oh," she cried, starting up passionately, "let me go to him! I, brave—I, faithful—and papa knows everything, and can think me so still!"

But Major Seton kept her hand fast in his. "You shall go to your father in a few minutes, but I am going to talk to you a little first. He wishes it to be so."

She seated herself obediently; and Ralph, instead of speaking, busied himself again in drawing the plaid around her shoulders. As he did this, Archie was conscious that his hand trembled strangely; and the blood began to flow with life again in her veins. Was it dimly possible, not only that her father forgave her, but that Ralph would take her back to the old place—no, not to that; to a place higher and dearer far in his heart?

She stammered out something about his great goodness, and the trouble he took for her, and how unworthy she was of it all; and then Ralph flung his arm around the little shrinking figure, plaid and all, and drew her to his side.

"Archie, can you ever care for me?" he whispered. "I'm too old and too rough and too plain for you, I know, but I love you from my heart! Will you have me?"

"I—I? ah, Major Seton, you are saying this now out of kindness!"

"Am I? Kindness to myself, then. Why, Archie," his voice sinking into a tone of wonderful tenderness, "what hope but you have I had in my life? What have I ever wanted to possess but you? Don't pretend to think it a new thing. You know that as a child I loved you, as a girl—"

"As a girl found me changed and false and worthless!" she interrupted, with something of her old impetuousness. "The first day in Morteville, don't you remember how I looked in your face—oh, Major Seton, you won't hate me when you think of it?—and told you I had never been in London in my life! I was

afraid at first you had recognized me, and were going to tell papa, and then, when you didn't speak, I thought perhaps if I told one great story it might set everything right—and I told it!"

"You did," said Major Seton; "and considering that I had looked deliberately in your face in London, and then helped you into the train at Ashford, you would have acted less like a child perhaps by speaking the truth."

"And you knew everything from the first then?" she cried. "You have known all along that I was acting a false part to you?"

Major Seton did not answer; only held her closer to his side, and looked down fondly into the face upheld so close to his.

"You have known all along that I was deceiving you?" she persisted; "and yet you tell me that you care for me still? It's pity, pity that makes you say this, Major Seton! You are so sorry for what I suffered to-day, and for papa, and the shame I have brought upon him and—"

"And I ask you to be my wife, Archie? Do you refuse me?"

"If I thought it wasn't from pity that you ask me!" she stammered, trying in vain to turn away from him.

And then Major Seton held her close against his heart: the heart from which he had never—no, not for one instant—succeeded in putting her away, and their compact was made. . . .

. . . "I shall never be quite sure you did not ask me out of pity!" said Archie, after a long silence.

"And I shall never be quite sure that you did not once like Gerald Durant better than you will ever like me!" said Major Seton, quickly. "So we shall each have some kind of misgiving to disturb our peace. Which has the most probability, do you think, for its basis? Look in your glass any morning, Miss Lovell, and say if it's likely that I, Ralph Seton, asked you to be my wife out of pity? Look at me and Gerald, any time when we are together, and say which would be the likeliest man to win a young girl's fancy?"

"I didn't know we were talking of fancies now, Major Seton; I thought we were talking of—"

"Of what, Archie?"

"Of love, then! as you make me say it; and Gerald did take

my fancy once; he takes it still: and you—oh, how badly I express everything!"

But Ralph Seton did not seem to think so.

They lingered on and on, forgetting, with the sublime selfishness of lovers, that poor Mr Lovell, all this time, was patiently waiting for them at the hall-door; and were only recalled at last to a consciousness of the external world by the distant village clock striking eleven. As they rose to go, Archie stood for a minute or two, silent and thoughtful; then suddenly she turned, threw up her arms around Major Seton's neck, and drawing down his head to her level, pressed his brown scarred cheek with her lips: the lips whose bloom was still intact as when she had kissed and clung to him last, a little child in Genoa.

"You forgive me utterly, Ralph? I'm not noble, or heroic, or any of the fine things you have called me. It was accident, I think, that made me tell the truth at all, and up to the last I would have got out of telling it if I could; but *you* forgive me freely, as you forgave my falsehood about Tino long ago? You know that you have not one scruple in asking me to be your wife?"

And I find, after several unsuccessful attempts, that I must give up trying to describe what Ralph Seton felt and answered. Can one language ever adequately reproduce another? Can dull ink and paper transcribe what a girl's fresh voice, what the touch of a girl's lips say, to the world-wearied heart of a man like Seton, in such a moment as this?

"Forgive you, my dearest!" he cried at last, bending over her with a great reverence in his tenderness. "No, Archie. When it is a question of forgiveness, of unworthiness, between us two, I feel that it is my place to be silent. Kiss me once more; put your hands in mine—so. Now, child, you and I will keep perfect faith, whatever comes, for the future. '*Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra*,' you remember?"

"I remember," she answered, between her tears. "'*Advienne que pourra*,'—oh, Ralph! can anything ever happen to part us two again?"

CHAPTER XLI.

A GLIMPSE OF THE BLUE.

When Sunday came the country people, from miles around, flocked in to Hatton church, as Archie had expected, to look at her; only, instead of being an object of contempt, she found herself a heroine! instead of humiliation, she had her triumph at last! On the preceding Friday, Lady Durant and Lucia (acting, no doubt, from the generous dictates of their own hearts, but a little, too, under male domination) had not only made a stately call at the Rectory, but had ostentatiously taken Archie for a drive through the village in their carriage, thus showing, publicly, to the country world what view was held by those high in authority of her conduct. The example was as contagious as royal favour shown unexpectedly to a half-suspected favourite. The parson's daughter was one of the right sort—had come forward and helped Mr Gerald through thick and thin; the parson's daughter was riding all the afternoon with the ladies of the Court. The leading parishioners came up, forthwith, with their wives and daughters, to call at the Rectory. Not only Archie herself, but Mr Lovell and Bettina, clothing-club feuds forgotten, were vested with the interest of public characters; and on Sunday, as I have said, crowds of country people flocked in to Hatton church, eager to have a look at the downcast girlish face in the parson's pew—the heroine, Archie Lovell.

Her triumph made the girl infinitely sad, infinitely humble. There was so wide a difference between the Archie Lovell whom the world called noble, and the weak, wavering, passion-tossed Archie Lovell whom she knew. If things had shaped themselves differently at this sharp turning-point of her life—if Ralph had forsaken her; if the people she lived amongst, instead of crowning her with laurel, had happened to consider her as lost—ten chances to one she would have hardened and deteriorated down to the level assigned her. But success is the real touchstone of character, and Archie's stood the test beautifully. Four weeks ago she was a

self-willed child, smoking her cigarettes, and defying Mrs Maloney and the proprieties as she ran wild about the Morteville streets: a child suspecting no evil, and careless how she incurred its imputation. As she walked home on her father's arm from Hatton church to-day, she was a woman—softened by a sense of her own weakness, brought low and meek by the love which in her inmost heart she seemed so little to have deserved. In her hour of success every baser element was cast out from that fine nature, and all that remained, henceforth and for ever, was pure gold.

I don't think I need describe a double wedding that took place one soft October morning in Hatton church. How opinions varied as to whether the pensive fair face or the mignonne dark one looked best beneath its orange blossoms; how Bettina, afraid really to cry because of her lovely dress and bonnet-strings, held her handkerchief to her eyes in delightful proximity to Lady Durant of Durant's Court; how Mr Lovell, in his agitation, very nearly married the wrong people to each other; how Sholto M'Ivor, in returning thanks, as best man, for the bridesmaids, contrived in twenty incoherent words to condense together every embarrassing remark that could possibly be made on the subject of old loves and transferred affections. It is all a thing of the past now. The wedding took place more than a year ago, and the four people most interested know pretty well whether the adventure they made then in the great lottery is likely to turn out a prize or not.

Gerald Durant has left the army, and lives at Durant's Court with the old people. He is a good deal bored, but not more, he fondly tries to think, than he would be if he was going through his former mill-horse life of London and Paris dissipation. He keeps excellent hunters, has instituted a *chef* in the Court kitchen, already inclines ever so slightly to stoutness, and is not very much worried, save by his wife's occasional fits of jealousy about Mrs Seton, and the persistency with which she sings long songs, always in the style of Mr Bligh, of an evening. As years go by, he thinks, and as Lucia's baby-daughter grows old enough to require training, he will probably be less bored still; and in the mean time

it is a great thing to have as pleasant a house to go to as Ludbrooke, a woman as charming as Mrs Seton to leaven the whole dull mass of heavy county society.

Of the Setons, all I have to say is written in four words—four very rare words to be able to record of any two human beings—they suit each other! Half Mr Lovell's time is spent at Ludbrooke. Troy hangs there—there was no good light for it in the parsonage, the poor fellow suddenly discovered, when Archie married—and of an evening he and his daughter stand before it still, talking in whispers, her hand within his arm, of the great poet and painter he may yet become, should fate prove a little kinder to his wishes.

I can fancy them talking just as foolishly when all the roses shall have died on Mrs Seton's face, and when the blue eyes have grown dimmed, and other affections, other cares, surround her in the years to come.

Women of weaker calibre can forget after they are married that they were daughters once. In a heart as loving and as large as Archie's, there will be no dethronements.

THE END.

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